TWO GIRLS.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

PAGE

VALENTINE 5

CHAPTER II.

PREPARATIONS 17

CHAPTER III.

BACK-DOOR NEIGHBORS 31

CHAPTER IV.

VAL'S ESCAPADE 39

CHAPTER V.

A NOVEMBER LUNCHEON 50

CHAPTER VI.

ELDORADO ANN 61

CHAPTER VII.

ABOUT CHRISTMAS-GIFTS 69

CHAPTER VIII.

HOLIDAYS 83

CHAPTER IX.

FUN AND NONSENSE 95

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PAGE

CHAPTER X.

THE PARTY 107

CHAPTER XI.

VALENTINES 121

CHAPTER XII.

MISFORTUNE 134

CHAPTER XIII.

A LITTLE LOVE-MAKING 148

CHAPTER XIV.

A JOURNEY 162

CHAPTER XV.

HOMESICK 175

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. SMITH 190

CHAPTER XVII.

TOMMY 205

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOME AGAIN 218

CHAPTER XIX.

COUSIN BETTY 232

CHAPTER XX.

"AUF WIEDERSEHEN" 248

TWO GIRLS.

CHAPTER I.

VALENTINE.

"WHERE are you, auntie?" called Theo, opening one door after another. A voice answered, "Here, dearie;" and Theodora, waving a letter above her head, followed the direction of the voice, and found her aunt in that cosiest of places, the sitting-room, a book open on the table by her side, and her needle fast flying as she took stitches in the button-holes she was making.

"A letter for you, auntie," said Theo. "I am just dying to know who is writing to you from New Orleans."

"Curious child! Give me the letter. I have a mind not to tell you."

Theo seated herself on a low chair, mischievously watching her aunt's face, upon which an expression of surprise gave place to one of perplexity, and finally, laying down the letter, Miss Nelson sat for some time lost in deep thought. She was roused by a long-drawn

sigh from Theo, who was fast becoming weary of the silence.

"You have forgotten all about me, auntie, I do believe," she at last said.

"I confess it," returned her aunt. "I wonder if I would best consult you, Theo. I have a very important question to decide, which concerns you nearly, and in which you should perhaps have a voice. You are getting to be such a big girl it is quite time you were called upon to exercise your judgment. You may read the letter—no, I will tell you about it. You know my only sister died a year after her marriage, and some time after her husband married a second time, a cousin of ours, of whom we were all very fond. Now both Valentine and his wife are dead. This letter tells me that their only child is among strangers at school. It was Margaret's wish that, if I could conveniently do so, I should take charge of her little daughter. I do not know that you remember Cousin Margaret, Theo; she was here some years ago, and, seeing what a contented little family we were,—my boy and girl and I,—she always wished afterwards that in case her daughter should ever be left alone in the world she might be one of us. Valentine is named for her father, and is fourteen, just a year younger than you are, dear."

"I remember Cousin Margaret; she was very lovely," said Theo, slowly. "Will you let me have a 'think,' too, auntie? I may have some fighting to do."

"My dear girlie," returned her aunt, "I am afraid

the fight will not be yours alone. We will talk it over in our confidential hour. There! I hear Archie. Bless the boy! how I shall miss him!"

Theo jumped up and ran out to meet her brother, a tall fellow of eighteen, who called out,—

"Halloo, Theo, whither away so fast? Don't let me keep you," as Theo, in her haste, slid two or three steps, and went bang up against the door before she could stop herself. "Let me open the door for you, if you are so anxious to get out; it is bad form to go through the panels," said Archie, picking up his sister from where she sat in ecstasy of mirth. "Funny, isn't it?" he went on.

"Oh, Archie, do stop!" said Theo.

"Had you a very pressing engagement?" asked Archie, with a serious countenance. "There may be time yet," consulting his watch.

"Silly boy! You know I am not going anywhere."

"Bet you five cents you are."

"But I am not," persisted Theo, now on her feet.

"But you are."

"Well, if you know so much, where, may I ask?"

"To dinner," responded Archie, triumphantly, whirling her around and marching her to the dining-room, where the dinner was about to be served.

"I shall have to have that five cents," he continued, seating himself at the table, where his aunt was already in her place. "I am going to a base-ball match this afternoon, and I am dead broke. My only chance of getting in is to hang around outside till fortune favors

me and sends the ball over the fence, when I shall pick it up and insist upon returning it myself."

"I didn't bet," replied Theo: "so there!"

"So you didn't," said Archie, putting down his knife and fork. "Then I suppose I must work my passage."

"What are you going to do at college, Archie," asked his aunt, "if you are so improvident now?"

"Really, my dear aunt Janet, I wish you would not ask me such very abstruse questions. These matters of political economy are always too much for me. Don't look so distressed, The. I cannot conscientiously say that I ever expect to live in the White House, nor can I give you hopes of being the sister of a future President. As I was saying, bimetallism is too involved a subject for me. Gold or silver! what do I care, as long as my pocket-book is full of greenbacks? and at present it is very, very flat. Fortunately, it is not always the last of the month; in the course of time the first will come. Pass me the 'cosmetics,' please, Theo: I fain would dress my salad."

"Oh, dear, Archie," sighed Theo, passing him the oil and vinegar, "what shall I do without you? It makes cold shivers run up and down my back whenever I think of next month. I wish one could absorb knowledge with one's food; if by eating salad, for example, one acquired so much rhetoric, or by eating oatmeal so much history, how nice it would be!"

"That would be a scheme," returned her brother; "but still I think the university will be rather fun, myself, for all the grind. Good-by, my children: I

must be off. It is a long and weary way to the base-ball grounds, and these little feet must begin their journey." And Archie was off.

"We shall miss him," said Theo, going out on the porch and watching the retreating figure of her brother. "I wish I could go too."

"And leave me?" said her aunt, putting an arm around her. "The university is not so very far, dear, and I have no doubt our boy will be home every week or two. But you are right: we shall miss him."

Theodora and Archie Nelson were little children of two and five years of age when their aunt Janet began to devote her life to them. She took them home with her one winter night, her only brother's children, left fatherless and motherless; and no mother could have been a closer friend or a better. Wealth was not theirs, but the old home was dear to them all. Here Aunt Janet and her brother had played as little children, and here Theo and Archie played around the same old trees, making a play-room of the same old garret, teasing and petting Mammy Jane, who carried their father about when he was a baby, and who was not less devoted to "Mars' Theo's childun." The house had stood, in former days, a little out of town, but now, with the extension of streets and the building of new houses, was quite within the town limits.

Leaving her aunt to think over the new problem presented her, Theo took her own "think" in her favorite place, a room in the front gable of the house. It was not a very large room, and was used for the storage of furniture, trunks, and boxes; but it was out

of the way, and from the window Theo could see, in summer, only tree-tops and sky, and it was the least distracting spot she could find.

To lose Archie and to gain a new member of the household was a subject for consideration, a matter not to be realized at once.

Theo was an intense, warm-hearted, impulsive girl, with a strong imagination and a good share of ideality, which latter qualities gave her trouble sometimes, from the fact that she would often build her likes or dislikes upon very small foundation, and was apt to endow her friends with qualities in the existence of which there was, perhaps, very little ground for belief, though it may be the fact that she expected the best of them often brought out that best when they were with her.

While Theo sat dreamily on one of the trunks, she tried very hard to analyze her feelings about the coming of Valentine Le Moyne. "If I could only see her," she thought. "I am jealous, I am afraid, and in my heart I don't want her to come: so I shall punish myself by telling auntie I think she ought to come. I wonder if she will have to room with me. There is Archie's room, to be sure, but I could not bear—no, I could not bear to have her take that; it would seem as if he were gone away altogether."

Then a sudden thought struck her, and she clasped her hands delightedly. "I know," she said; "if auntie will only let me."

However, she kept her counsel till time should bring around the evening hour, and in the mean time went

down to Mammy Jane with her head full of her new schemes.

She found the old woman, who was now the only house-servant, in the kitchen crooning over and over a weird sort of hymn;

> "Yoh go yourn an' I'll go mine,
> All come togedder in de harbes' time.
> Somebody bu'ied in de grabeyard,
> Somebody bui'ed in de sea,
> Gwine to git up in de mawnin'
> To soun' a jubilee."

"Law, honey, is dat yoh?" she asked, wringing out her dish-towels. "I was jes' stud'in' what to have fo' supper. What yoh reckon Mars' Arch like? He gwine 'way so soon I like de chile fur to have all his tasties."

"Suppose you have Jane Clark? you know he was always fond of that when he was a little boy."

"Dat is so, baby. I has Jane Clark." This delectable dish was named in compliment to mammy, and was one of which the children had been extremely fond when little things; it was bread spread with molasses and fried in butter, there being a toothsomeness about the crisp, buttery edges which appealed strongly to the youthful palate.

"Yoh reckon Mars' Arch gwine ter be hongry?" asked mammy, as she gave her towels a shake.

"Is he ever anything else?" said Theo.

"I wonders ef he git enough to eat up to dat place he gwine? I'll lay he come home all gone and peaked."

"No, he will not," replied Theo. "Trust him. Mammy, do you remember my aunt Lucy?"

"Co'se I does, honey. She were a angel ob light,—a angel ob light."

"Did you ever see her husband?"

"Mars' Val? Yass, indeed, I has so."

"What was he like?"

"Well, he was one ob dese proud, uprighteous young mens; but he mighty good, I reckon. What set yoh stud'in' 'bout him?"

"I remember his second wife, Cousin Margaret."

"Does yoh? Yass, I 'members her too. She a mighty nice lady; sholy she was. She was fust cousin to yoh pa and yoh aunt Janet. She done come hyar many a time when dey was all young folkses togedder."

"Did you know she died nearly two years ago?"

"Dat so? Po' Miss Marg'ret! Hm! hm! fust one, den anodder. Yoh auntie ain't got much lef', 'scusin' yoh an' Mars' Arch. She mighty good,—she mighty good," went on the old woman, reflectively, with her hand at the side of her face. "Yoh auntie, sholy, is one ob de childun ob de kingdom."

"Dear auntie!" said Theo, softly; and while mammy stirred about the kitchen, she sat lost in thought till the sizzling in the pan of Jane Clark reminded her that it was nearly supper-time, and that she must have her talk with her auntie.

She opened the sitting-room door softly, and found Miss Nelson sitting in the dusk. "Well, auntie?" said Theo, going up to her.

"Well, dearie?" was the response.

"What has your 'think' told you, auntie?"

"Tell me yours first."

"Must I? Well, I think Valentine ought to come; and, auntie, she can have my room."

"Oh, no, my baby, not that! I cannot let you do so."

"Just wait, auntie, till I explain," said Theo, cuddling close to her aunt's side. "You know the gable room that I love so well; I want you to let me have that; the trunks and boxes can go in the 'cubby-hole' or the back attic. I have been to look, and there is plenty of room. And, auntie, it would be mean to put a stranger 'way off by herself. You know I shall not care; and we couldn't give up Archie's room, nor the spare room, nor this. So you see——"

"But, my child, the room is not fit."

"Do you give me leave to try what I can do? I see great possibilities."

"Dear child, I confess that one question was what puzzled me most. I did not want to ask you to share your room with a stranger. I think it is one luxury above all others which should be allowed one if possible,—some corner strictly one's own,—some place of absolute privacy."

"I knew you thought so, auntie, and I think so too," returned Theo. "I am so glad you don't think me selfish for not offering to share my room with Valentine."

"Selfish, dear, to give up your room!"

"No, not that; that is, this seems such an easy way out of it, if you don't mind. And she is coming, auntie, isn't she?"

"Do you wish her to?"

Theo was silent a moment. "I didn't want her to at first," she said, "but now I do,—at least I want to want to."

"Then she shall. Thank you, dear; you have made it much easier for me."

At this moment a face appeared at the door, and Archie came in. He was told the news, and, for a moment, was quite disconcerted.

"Botheration!" he said. "Who wants any one coming in and spoiling our cosy times? Hasn't she any grandmother, or sister-in-law, or somebody, to take her? I say, auntie, I think it is a beastly shame."

"You don't think so, Archie," said his aunt, quietly. "I am sure you don't really think so."

"Where are you going to put her?" he asked, presently, having been gloomily sitting with his hands thrust into his pockets.

"We will arrange that."

"She is not going to have my room," said he, in alarm. "Now, auntie, I draw the line there. Why, I should feel as if I had no home at all."

"No, she shall not have your room," said Theo, going up to him and putting a loving hand on his shoulder. "She is going to have mine."

"I'd like to see her!" was the response. "Horrid little thing! Why doesn't she stay where she is?"

"Now, Archie, don't you worry," said Theo, cheerfully; "I have no doubt we shall all love her dearly," the girl went on, roused to a championship of the stranger by this violent opposition to her coming. "I

have a most beautiful plan, which I will divulge to you after we have made ourselves ill eating Jane Clark. Come along, cross-patch." And, seizing him by the arm, she dragged him down-stairs to the dining-room.

After supper the brother and sister walked up and down the porch while Theo unfolded her plan.

"And, Archie dear, it will be such fun; I have always been wild to do something to that dear old room. Now, don't be disagreeable, but say you will help me. I know we can paper it ourselves."

"Oh, I don't mind that part," was Archie's reply; "but I say, Theo, it will be an awful bore to have that girl around; she will want to go tagging along everywhere we do, and we shall have to be careful of her feelings and all that, and we can't say out our say when we want."

Theo laughed. "Oh," she answered, "as to that, when you want to say out your say you can just come up to my room,—you know it will be out of all hearing,—and you can rant and rave all you want. Oh, Archie, I wonder how you will like being away. Do you suppose they will haze you awfully? You poor Fresh!"

"Humph!" he replied, scornfully. "They don't do that as much as they used, though no doubt I shall have my own little turn; but I fancy I can stand as much as other fellows."

"Well, you will help me with the room?"

"Won't I! When shall we pitch in?"

"Oh, right away,—to-morrow, I think. We'll 'survey the prospect o'er' directly after breakfast. Do you

know, Archie, I believe auntie hates an interloper as much as we do, but she is so good she won't say so."

"As much as we do! I thought you were charmed with the prospect."

"Oh," exclaimed Theo, "I didn't mean to say that, but it is really there inside of me. I mean the not wanting her. I do want her, and I don't want her. I want her because I think it is horribly selfish not to, and yet my heart sinks whenever I think of it; but I am going to imagine her an angel, and then I shall be wild to see her."

"Better not," responded Archie, "or she will be sure to turn out something else. I suppose it is sort of vile not to want her."

"Yes, poor thing," said Theo; "she has no one at all, Archie, and we ought to want to protect her."

"That's so," said Archie, his chivalry appealed to. "Well, we'll make the best of it. Theo, as you say, it is hard on auntie too; we're enough, in all conscience."

"Then let's not leave her alone any longer," said Theo; "we shall have you such a little while."

"Goodness, child! do you expect me to be assassinated, or what, that you speak so? Is thy servant doomed?"

"No; but something might happen."

"It might happen this minute. It is growing dark, Theodora; I hear the mutterings of thunder; it may be—yes, it may be that while we are standing here a flash of lightning may come and shrivel us to cinders. Pshaw, The! you don't scare worth a cent. Let us go in to auntie." And in they went.

CHAPTER II.

PREPARATIONS.

"WHAT is the name of the interloper?" asked Archie the next morning at breakfast.

"Aren't you ashamed, Archie!" spoke up Theo. "Her name is Valentine Le Moyne, and I think it is a beautiful name."

"You do, do you? Well, I think it is an idiotic name; sounds like a dime novel or a circus freak."

"Hush, Archie! I will not have you talk so."

"Saint Valentine! Oh, no; he was a man. A girl with a man's name, two of them, in fact,—Theodore and Valentine. It is well I am going away; none of my neckties would be safe. By the way, I believe I missed another one yesterday. I know auntie didn't take it."

"You are too mean for anything," pouted Theo, who did occasionally borrow her brother's ties. "Keep your old ties!"

"Just what I intend to do, my fair sister," having gained his point in rousing Theo's ire. "Would you favor me with a little more of the 'goozleum'?" his favorite name for any kind of gravy or sauce. "My chicken seems to be a trifle dry, though the same cannot be said of my sister's sweet eyes. It grieves me,

Theo, to see you so lachrymose on this bright morning. Lady, pray do not weep!"

"I am not weeping," said Theo, indignantly, who could never get used to Archie's teasing, and who was now much nearer to tears than before.

"Stop your teasing, Archie," said his aunt, peremptorily. "You are too utterly silly for anything."

"I silly? My dear aunt, you forget with what *éclat* I passed my examinations; but 'twas ever thus,' 'a prophet is not without honor,' etc." And Archie subsided into a meek and humble condition, never raising his eyes from his plate, and asking for certain dishes in such a very deprecating way that Theo almost felt as if his feelings were really hurt, though she knew better.

Theo beckoned to her brother as they left the table, and the two went flying up-stairs to the gable room, where Theo pointed out its possibilities. Archie sat on a trunk, softly whistling.

"What are you going to do with that big hole in the wall by the chimney where the plaster has fallen?"

"I thought I would get a piece of stout unbleached muslin and glue over it, then it could be papered right over that. Wouldn't that do?"

"First-rate," replied Archie. "The first thing is to get these trunks and boxes out and have the room swept up. I say, Theo, I'll make you a window-seat."

"Oh, will you, Arch? That will be perfect. I did want one, and was going to try to do it myself."

"Look here," responded Archie, "don't you go doing such things while I am at home; it will be time

enough for you to try your hand when I am gone. Let's pitch in and get these things out at once." So between them the room was soon cleared.

"The next thing is to get the paper," said Theo, quite in her element. "I shall have to go down-town right away."

"I'll go too," responded Archie. "I consider myself quite a 'connozier' in papers. Let me see, this room faces north: you'll want something light and sunny-looking. I should say a pale buff."

"Yes," returned Theo, "I think so too: a small figure that will not be conspicuous. Come on, Archie." And they clattered down the stairs, intent upon their project.

The trip to the paper-hanger's consumed more time than they bargained for, and Theo became quite bewildered over the various patterns unrolled for her consideration, but after discarding all colors but buff, and next selecting only small figures, she found it not so difficult a matter to decide upon what she really wanted. Then came the border, and this took more time, for, by some curious contrariness of design, just the right thing seemed impossible; but it was finally discovered in a scroll pattern where delicate blues, pinks, and olives harmonized well with the buff. As the ceiling must also be provided for, another lot of papers had to be discussed, which seemed as difficult an undertaking as the other, the stock consisting largely of ornate flowery wreaths or sprawling figures; but at length a less pronounced design was reached, and they bore home their purchase in triumph.

With a big table, a large pair of shears, and a great bucket of paste, the amateur paper-hangers set to work.

"First the ceiling must be done," said Theo; "that will be the worst job. Do you suppose we can ever do it, Arch? You see it slopes a little at the sides."

"Oh, I can manage it," returned Archie, nothing daunted, and soon the first strip was ready. Archie mounted the table, with one end of the sticky sheet in his hands, the other end being carefully held by Theo. Oh, ignominious failure! it fell down upon their heads. A second attempt yielded no better success, and they sat down, looking at each other with dismayed countenances.

"I know what is the matter," said Archie, presently: "the ceiling has been whitewashed, and of course it won't stick."

"But they must sometimes have to paper whitewashed rooms," said Theo.

"Yes," thoughtfully from Archie. "It seems to me they have to make a sizing first. At any rate, we'll try it, The. We didn't use all that glue in the paste, did we?"

"No: there was a lot left."

"All right: we'll melt it up in another bucket by pouring hot water over it, then we'll take old brooms and swash the ceiling with it."

No sooner said than done. Then again Archie mounted the table, breathlessly watched by Theo.

"It sticks!" she cried, triumphantly. "Oh, Archie, it really sticks!"

"You're right, it does,—like wax. Now for another strip, Theo." And at last the ceiling was covered.

The walls were comparatively easy to manage, the paper going perfectly over the unbleached muslin where the hole had been, and the two finally viewed their work, feeling that they had covered themselves with glory, if also with paste.

"There are a few varicose veins," said Archie to his aunt, who came up to see the result, "but otherwise I think it is a pretty good job. We couldn't help the cracks, you know, and that is why the varicose veins; but I think it will do."

"Do! I should say so," exclaimed Theo. "It is lovely. We must paint the wood-work next. I shall like to do that. See, auntie, what a nice soft color, just between buff and gray."

By the end of another day the room was fresh with new paint; and then came the question of furniture.

"I don't really know what you will put in the room, Theo. I am afraid we cannot afford to buy anything," said Miss Nelson.

"I may have anything not in use, may I not, auntie?"

"Certainly, dear. There is an old bureau in the upper hall that you may have: it is really in the way where it is." So with Archie's help, and with much laughing and struggling, the big bureau was carried up.

The floor had been painted, and was to be covered with rugs.

Archie and Theo, with a candle, spent much time

bumping around the "cubby-hole," which was a wonderful place for discoveries. From it they dragged forth an old bedstead, several seatless chairs, a battered washstand, and a table; these were all cleaned and varnished, and the chairs reseated by the use of some strips of webbing and some blue denims. The bedstead was set up; but here came another halt, for in trying the slats they were found too short, it being evident that in getting rid of some old furniture the wrong slats had been given away.

"What shall we do?" exclaimed Theo, in dismay.

"Do you suppose I am going to be balked by a little thing like that, any more than I was by the ceiling?" returned Archie. "No, sir." And he went tumultuously down-stairs, followed by Theo.

"What are you going to do?" questioned she, finding her brother in an out-house where odds and ends were kept.

"Saw some new slats," returned he, vigorously pulling out some boards; and, true to his word, it was not very long before a new set of slats were in place, the old springs being fitted upon them.

Next came the window-seat, and then Theo concluded she must have a dressing-table, which was made by screwing together two boxes of the proper size, giving a shelf, and the table, being draped with an old muslin dress ripped up and washed, looked "quite stylish," Theo declared. There seemed no end to possibilities, for Archie contrived a shelf over the door for "bric-a-braw," and a set of book-shelves, so that from being an impossible sort of place Theo's room was really the

cosiest one in the house, when a wood stove and muslin curtains were finally added.

"You have done wonders, wonders!" exclaimed Miss Janet. "I had no idea you had such resources. I almost envy you your room, Theo; it is absolutely charming;" for Theo had removed all her girlish possessions and had arranged them as tastefully as possible about the room.

"Isn't it a real little nest?" said Theo, going to the window. "I feel like a bird up here, auntie; though I shall miss you," she said, turning to kiss her aunt's cheek.

"Yes, my baby bird has taken her first flight," returned her aunt. "And now we must get Valentine's room ready for her: she will be here in a few days."

"Do you think I ought to have left any of my belongings for her?" asked Theo, anxiously.

"No, child: she doubtless has her own household gods to set up, and will be glad of a place for them."

The next few days were anxious ones, not only to Theo, but to Miss Janet, for no one knew how the latter dreaded this new influence in her harmonious little household. Theo had been so closely hers since the little baby arms clung around her neck that first night of her coming, that Miss Janet felt it would be impossible to give a stranger the place that Theo occupied, and she feared her own feeling would show in spite of her effort to seem impartial. So the coming of Valentine Le Moyne meant anxious thought and constant care. Miss Nelson dreaded, too, the control of the unformed character, not knowing what traits might

develop, and what the effect would be upon Theo, whose strongly imaginative and impulsive nature might be seriously warped by contact with this new element, should it prove an unpleasant one. For Archie she did not fear in this matter, as his associations at the university were the ones chiefly to be dreaded; but she trusted to the boy's sturdy principle and innate sense of honor to carry him safely through the period of his student life, and knew his sunny nature would help to find the way out of whatever difficulties might rise in his path.

"I suppose I am to go down to meet the Freak," said Archie on the morning of the day Valentine was to arrive. "How am I to know her? I suppose she will carry a red handkerchief, or a blue badge, or something."

"Oh, I want to go too!" exclaimed Theo. "I am certain I shall know her, and Archie is sure to go in one door while she goes out another, or something of the sort. You know you always do, Archie."

"I never did but once," retorted Archie. "I was there in the 'nicholas' of time, only you didn't wait a minute,—you were in such a hurry to get home; but this time I shall go hours before the train gets in; in fact, I don't know but what I shall go to the next station and board the train there. She won't have any manager with her, do you think, Theo?"

"For shame, Archie! I think you are outrageous. You know she is in mourning. She was at school all last year, but it has only been two years since she lost her mother. I think you ought to have more feeling."

"He is only teasing, Theo," put in Miss Janet. "You ought to know how to take him by this time. I am not afraid of any want of consideration on his part." And she nodded brightly to Archie, who grinned in response, for "teasing Theo when she had her spurs on," as he called it, was his favorite amusement. "Really, though," he went on, gravely, "I do expect something abnormal: she doesn't happen to be a double-voiced vocalist, or a famous snake-charmer, or anything like that, does she? You might prepare me, Theo."

"You know she isn't," declared Theo, with emphasis.

"I don't *know*. How can I, when I have never seen her?"

"You are as sure as can be there is nothing unusual about her."

"Oh, she is stupidly commonplace? How uninteresting! I suppose she sits with her mouth half open and giggles whenever you look at her."

"Archie Nelson, do stop. I wish you could stick to the truth."

"Stick to the truth! My dear, I am as truthful as Julius Cæsar. I will not say George Washington, for somehow I do not yearn to be without imagination, a lack it always seemed to me a misfortune in so excellent a man."

"What does he mean, auntie?"

"My dear, how can I tell? I have long ago ceased to pay any attention to this silly boy's vagaries."

"Why, you see, Theo," continued Archie, with an

air of imparting valuable knowledge, "George Washington could not tell a lie; it argues nothing in his favor,—he *could* not, mind you. You remember the speech which rings 'down the grooves of time,'—'I cannot tell a lie, pa.' There seems to me almost agony in his tones: he had vainly tried to, but could not. Now, I can tell lies by the yard, by the bushel; my imagination runs riot; I see before me a vista of yarns reaching from here to China. I can lie, and lie, and lie, but, dear sister mine, I don't want to. Far be it from me to seem irreverent, but no doubt George wanted to and couldn't." But before Archie had finished his speech Theo had picked up a book, and her brother, seeing no one was paying any attention to him, left the room.

Valentine was to arrive about four o'clock in the afternoon. It was the middle of September, and Theo's school did not begin till the next week, so she was at liberty to bestow as much time as she wished upon Valentine's room. She had adorned it with flowers, had made a pretty toilet-set for the bureau, had run in and out a dozen times to see that all was exactly right, and by half-past three was ready to start to the station.

"Archie," she cried, "I am waiting. Do come! we shall be late."

"Don't wait for me," came a muffled answer. "I will be there as soon as I can get ready." And so Theo started on.

She lingered around the waiting-room, walked up and down the platform, and still no Archie; but just

as the train came in she saw his long legs striding towards her, and he was just in time to see Theo, who had been anxiously scanning each face, step forward eagerly to a little dark-haired, blue-eyed girl in mourning.

"I am sure this is Valentine Le Moyne," he heard Theo say, and was by her side in time to hear the answer, "Yes; and you are Theo."

"This is my brother, Archie Nelson." And Theo presented him. The blue eyes lifted themselves and then dropped, a little shyly.

"You must be very tired," remarked Archie. "Where are your checks?—Will you take Miss Le Moyne to the waiting-room, Theo, while I see to her baggage?"

So the two girls, each taking a mental inventory of the other, went to the waiting-room together.

Valentine saw a fair, tall girl, with gray eyes and an abundance of warm brown hair that rippled and waved over her head, curling in little rings about her neck and ears; the small head well poised; a sensitive mouth, parting to show white, even teeth. "She would be almost a beauty," thought Valentine, "if her eyes were larger and her nose smaller."

Theo saw a daintily rounded little figure, a pair of dark-blue eyes shaded by long lashes, fine dusky hair brushed back from a low forehead, a delicate, impertinent little nose, a rather large but well-formed mouth, the corners of which turned up, giving a funny, mirthful expression to the face. The hands and feet were small and slender. Altogether, Theo was quite charmed, and looked exultantly at Archie as he re-

turned from the baggage-room; but that person only shrugged his shoulders, and, picking up Valentine's satchel, followed the girls from the room.

"You came near not being here in time, Archie. What kept you?" asked Theo.—"He only reached here as the train came up to the station," turning to Valentine.

"You must know, Miss Le Moyne," began Archie, "that I have a fiery and untamed collar-button,—a very Bucephalus of a collar-button,—which upon occasions, usually important ones like the present, careers away from me, and requires an ignominious chase before it can be properly haltered. To-day, Theo, when you called me, this wild and reckless button was insanely galloping around the room, and I was on my hands and knees under the bed galloping after it, with maledictions upon my lips and rage in my heart, and that is why I was late."

Valentine looked up with an amused smile, saying, "You should have a hitching-post in your room."

"I intend to when I go to college," replied Archie, with a twinkle in his eye, secretly pleased that Valentine should fall into the spirit of his nonsense so readily.

"There is our home," announced Theo, as they approached the old place.

Valentine looked eagerly, and the color mounted into her face. Theo put out a tender hand and held the other's as they went up the steps, for, by an intuitive sympathy, she felt that Valentine dreaded meeting her aunt Janet.

Miss Nelson stood on the steps ready to meet them.

"Welcome home," she said, stretching out her hands to Valentine. The girl paused a moment, then lifted her face to Miss Janet, who bent over and kissed her and drew her into the house, her heart going out to the lonely little girl.

"Shall you like to go to your room, dear?" she asked. "You must be tired from your long journey." And, Theo leading the way, Miss Janet and Valentine went up to the little room. "We have put you in here, next to me." And Miss Janet, opening the door, ushered Valentine into her apartment.

"Shall I sleep alone?" inquired Valentine.

"Why, yes. Are you not used to it?"

"I had a room-mate the two years I was at school; before that I used to sleep in mamma's room."

"And you would rather not be alone?"

Valentine was silent.

Theo looked at her aunt. "I will have a cot in here, if you like," she suggested; "anyhow, until you are used to it." But she spoke only after a struggle, for she had rejoiced at the seclusion of her own room, which she felt to be so entirely hers, "made out of nothing," as she said.

A grateful look from her aunt rewarded her effort, and so that matter was settled.

At the outset Miss Nelson discovered that Valentine, though a girl of warm impulses, with affectionate appealing little ways, was inclined to consider herself first, and she felt that the danger would be in her making such demands upon Theo that the latter would be imposed upon frequently. It was a delicate posi-

tion, for, as a stranger, all courtesy was due to the new-comer; and Miss Nelson pondered seriously over the subject.

Theo devoted herself heart and soul to Valentine's interests. Archie found her a congenial spirit, showing so ready a wit and so flattering an appreciation of his nonsense that she quite won his approbation; and Theo, though loyalty itself, felt that Archie might sometimes be a little less attentive to the new inmate of the family.

However, there was nothing absolutely wrong about Valentine, and Miss Nelson congratulated herself that the faults of her new charge were only such as could be remedied by patience and example; and so Valentine was adopted into the family with less friction than had been anticipated.

CHAPTER III.

BACK-DOOR NEIGHBORS.

BEFORE a week had elapsed, Valentine's residence at Roseville was an established fact. Instead of "Cousin Janet," "auntie" came from her as naturally as it did from Archie and Theo. The stiff "Mr. Nelson" and "Miss Le Moyne" gave place to "Archie" and "Val," and so used did Valentine become to her surroundings that at Miss Nelson's suggestion Theo gave up her cot and returned to her own nest at the top of the house. Valentine was a little inclined to resent the change, but Miss Nelson took it so as a matter of course that she did not like to make any marked objections, much to Theo's relief.

Preparations for Archie's departure were going forward, and in them all took a keen interest. Archie was settling up his affairs, disposing of his superfluous property, and acting altogether as if this event in his life would sever him from all his old fancies. He had, some years before, taken it into his head to raise chickens, but, for one reason or another, had not been very successful.

"I don't see what becomes of my chickens," he said, one morning. "I am sure something gets them, and I am going to set a trap. Last week I had three hens,

and now I have only one left. I have two roosters and five poor little half-grown chickens out of all the lot I had in the spring."

"I firmly believe the Reeds take them," said Theo.

The Reeds were a family who lived back of the Nelsons and were a continual source of annoyance to Theo, whose fastidious taste was shocked by the filth and squalor in which the Reeds lived. As a matter of conscience she tried to help the family, but her overtures were never received very graciously. The little dilapidated shanty, too, was a continual eyesore, for it was the one spot that marred the pleasant scene of field and river upon which Theo loved to look. The Reed children were an impertinent, quarrelsome crew, and their many depredations upon the fruit-trees in Miss Nelson's garden, their attacks with sling-shot upon the song-birds which Theo would never have molested, and their general lawlessness, roused her indignation so that she was always quite ready to lay the blame where it was, no doubt, quite as often deserved. Archie, probably from contrariness, usually took sides with the Reeds, and insisted that Tommy, the most daring and impudent one of the tribe, was really great fun; and he would invite the youngster into the grounds, or quiz him over the fence, to Theo's disgust and horror.

"I know it is the Reeds who take your chickens," persisted she.

"Nonsense!" declared Archie. "My friend Tommy Reed has too great a respect for me to do such a thing. You're always down on the poor little rascal. No, I

think it is a mink, or something of the sort. I shall set a trap."

A box-trap was set, and the next morning Archie, going to look at it, heard a scuffling inside. "Aha!" ejaculated he, "I knew it was some wild creature. Prepare to die, my fine fellow!" And, taking the trap in his hand, he carried it down to a small pond near the place and plunged it in. As he drew it out, there was still a slight movement; so again he immersed it, this time holding it long enough to make sure of drowning his victim. "You'll catch no more of my chickens," he cried. "I'll be bound you were after my last poor biddy. Die, wretch, die!" And he presently drew forth the trap wet and dripping; but what was his consternation upon opening it to find his last poor innocent hen stark and drowned! "What a complete and consummate idiot!" exclaimed Archie, viewing with dismay the unhappy hen. Just then he heard a chuckle behind him, and looking around he saw the grinning face of Tommy Reed.

"Yer got fooled, didn't yer?" taunted he. "That ain't the way to kill chickens. Why didn't yer wring its neck?"

"I'll wring your neck!" retorted Archie. "Look here, Tommy, what's that you have there?" catching sight of a bag in the boy's hand.

"Cat," replied Tommy, laconically.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Drownd it."

Now, Archie was a very tender-hearted youth, and, being also consumed with remorse as to the ill-fated

hen, could not bear to see another victim added to the list that morning. "What are you going to drown it for?" he asked.

"Reckon I've as good a right to drown a cat as you have a hen. The pore hen never did you nor nobody no harm, an' this 'ere cat's a terror,—fights and scratches and steals awful. It scratched Eldorado Ann this morning, an' stole a great big piece of chicken yesterday."

"Let's see the cat," suggested Archie.

"No, yer don't," replied Tommy, cautiously. "I ain't goin' to let you fool me. Yer got fooled yourself, didn't yer?" And Tommy laughed derisively.

Archie eyed him savagely, and Tommy, raising his arm to fling the bag in the pond, was caught and held, though making stout resistance.

"Leave me go!" he shouted, "yer great overgrown bully."

By this time Archie's wrath had subsided, and he began to laugh. "See here, Tommy," he said, "I'm not going to hurt you. We're friends, Tommy; I'll make it all right. I tell you what I'll do: you give me the cat, and I'll give you the rest of my chickens if you won't tell about my drowning the hen."

Tommy looked up rather doubtfully. "I suppose he thinks he will get them anyhow," thought Archie, but he did not say so. Putting his hand in his pocket, he drew forth a knife. "I'll give you this, too." Tommy's eyes began to glisten. "Show us the knife," he said, putting down the bag. This Archie proceeded to do, and Tommy consented to make the exchange.

So Archie shouldered the bag and carried it home, taking it into the wood-shed; then he called Theo, who came running out.

Archie sat down on the wood-horse, saying, "I have a solemn charge for you, Theo,—a parting gift for you. In yon bag lies the form of an unfortunate creature for which I have bartered some of my dearest possessions. Open the sack, Theo."

Theo looked at the bag curiously and a little timidly, yet was greatly interested. "It isn't anything that will bite?" asked she.

"It can bite. I do not know its state of mind just at present. I should want to bite if I were in its place, but if you smile tenderly at it perhaps it will not."

Theo cautiously undid the string. A poor, skinny tabby cat, wild-eyed, with bristling tail and every hair erect, darted out and took refuge under a pile of boards.

"Why, it is the Reeds' cat. What are you doing with it? Poor creature!"

"I tell you it is mine. How it came to be in my possession is my secret, but I have a legal right to it, and I bestow the dear creature upon you."

"Poor pussy!" exclaimed Theo. "Oh, Archie, it has been so badly treated. I have often watched them abusing it, and have felt as if I could not contain myself. I have seen those little wretches tie it up with strings, almost choking it, leaving it that way for hours together; and it is kicked and cuffed by them all till I wonder it has a whole bone in its body."

"Tommy says," returned Archie, "that it is a bad and wicked cat. It seems that 'his hand is against

every man's, and every man's hand against him.' We'll have to call him Ishmael, Theo."

So the cat was named according to Archie's suggestion, and by dint of coaxing and feeding developed into a sleek, fine-looking animal, gentle and affectionate, and Theo grew very fond of him, while the Reed children were robbed of their prey and vented their spite upon each other.

The story of Archie's hen leaked out, however, and Val was never tired of teasing him about it, though he philosophically declared that he would as soon have drowned the hen as to be the means of offering further temptation to Tommy Reed, and that there were now no more chickens to steal, so he had no doubt Tommy's morals would greatly improve.

Having disposed of his responsibilities at home and packed his trunk, Archie took his leave, with many charges from his aunt, copious tears from Theo, blessings and prayers from mammy, and a final teasing query from Val as to whether he had provided himself with a trap for future use and amusement.

But even Val looked grave as the boy's merry face was lost to view, and Theo with red eyes betook herself to her own room, where, with Ishmael for solace, she spent the rest of the day.

With Archie's departure came school interests for the two girls. Val, as a new pupil, would presumably be a little nervous about the beginning of the term, but she really seemed less so than Theo, whose emotional nature not only felt her own experiences deeply, but also felt those of her friends in a great measure, so it

was with a beating heart that she set out with Val to school.

"You are actually pale," said Val, looking at her. "Do you really mind beginning again, Theo?"

"I don't know," returned she; "I should not mind it, but I think it is always a little hard at first when one has new studies to take up. Oh, Val, I hope you will like it."

"No doubt I shall, as well as any other school. Do you have much fun, Theo? Are the girls very nice?"

"Some of them are. Nannie Talcott I have always liked the best. She has been away all summer: she is a boarding pupil, you know."

"Is she pretty?" asked Val, quickly.

"She is very sweet-looking," answered Theo, "and she dresses well."

Val looked down at her own well-fitting gown with a satisfied air. "Is she a great favorite?" she continued.

"Oh, yes; I think the teachers consider her the brightest pupil in the school, and she is very lovable."

"And the teachers," Val went on, "are most of them pleasant?"

"I like Miss Harvey best."

"I don't care much for teachers," confessed Val; "they are so particular and so prying."

"Why, I don't think so; ours are not."

"Well, you know they are always bringing you to task and pulling you up short; then they ask all sorts of questions, and try to find out all about you in a way that I think is very disagreeable."

"But they have to. Why, Val, they cannot treat all the girls alike, when there are so many dispositions and temperaments, and of course they want to know how much to expect of a girl. If she is delicate or not very quick, it is harder for her to learn, and allowances must be made for such girls."

"Well, anyhow, I don't like them," returned Val, leaving Theo with quite a distressed feeling as to the success at school of her companion.

CHAPTER IV.

VAL'S ESCAPADE.

By the end of the week the girls were settled down to their work. Val was bright enough, but lacked application and a real love of learning, while Theo, who considered the smallest failure a disgrace, felt overcome with confusion at the frequent lapses from good recitations which seemed to disturb Val very little.

"Oh, what's the use?" she would say. "Of course one has to get through school somehow; but I don't see the sense of making such serious work of it."

And Theo saw her drifting into a set of girls from which she had always held herself aloof, preferring that other faction of earnest students to which Nannie Talcott belonged.

Val, with her dainty little ways and merry face, was soon a great favorite with the set of girls who "went in for fun," and whose leader was harum-scarum, happy-go-lucky Lee Crawford, called by her intimates "Fly," because of her roving propensities, being always on the go, flitting from one girl's home to another's, and, grievous to say, usually with a little morsel of gossip to drop at each place.

Theo grieved over Val's disaffection, for the latter,

finding Theo absorbed in her books, taking little interest in the pranks and antics of the set of a dozen girls who spent their time in devising new amusements, became less and less companionable to Theo, who, however, with unswerving loyalty, would never say a word against her cousin. So one day Theo was surprised that Val should say to her at breakfast, "Let me come up and sleep with you to-night, won't you, Theo?"

"Why, of course," she responded, heartily, being glad of any overture on Val's part.

It was Friday, and that evening Miss Nelson always went to take tea with a friend,—a custom of years,—not returning until half-past ten or eleven. Theo waited supper for Val, who did not make her appearance, so she ate her own meal alone. The hours passed; no Val. With a dread of something wrong, Theo crept to her room to watch for the delinquent; all sorts of fears possessed her, and the vague terrors which overcame her wrought her up to such a pitch of excitement that it required all her resolution to keep her from going to her aunt, who came in at her usual time and went to her own room.

Theo listened with ears whose hearing seemed to catch the faintest sound. The house became silent; still no Val. Theo, with hearing sharply acute, could almost fancy she heard her aunt breathing.

Finally, she crept down-stairs in her wrapper and slippers. Softly opening a shutter, through whose crevice she could watch, she sat looking towards the gate. About one o'clock she saw a little figure flying up the street, and in another moment she had opened the win-

dow and called softly, "Here, Val." Through the open window, from the porch, the shaking, trembling girl entered. Theo put her arms about her and led the way up the back stairs.

"Step softly, so as not to waken auntie," she whispered; and it was with a sigh of relief that she opened the door of her room and drew Val safely inside.

By this time Val was completely overcome and could only sob and cry, till Theo thought it would be useless to ask any questions till she were more composed, and she tenderly helped to undress the quaking little figure; then, with Theo's arms about her, and their heads on the same pillow, Val told the story of her escapade.

"Oh, Theo," she said, "how shall I tell you! There was to be a concert at Birney," a town a short distance away, "and Lee Crawford thought it would be such fun if we could all sneak away and go. I knew you would not tell on me, and we expected to get back by ten o'clock, so I thought I should be in before auntie; and even if I were not I knew you would be watching for me, and auntie would not know I had not gone to bed. Well, we went all right, and we took ice-cream and cake at a very nice place,—we thought that would do for supper,—and then we went to the concert. There were not very many there; but, oh, Theo! Archie was there with a party of the students who had come over from the university, and I am afraid he saw me. I don't know for certain, but I think he did. The girls behaved so I was ashamed of them, and I tried to hide. Then they made fun of me, and said I was setting up

for a saint, and there wasn't a bit of harm in coming, and that when I had seen a little more of the world I would know not to make a goose of myself. But I knew all the time it was wrong; and whenever the girls laughed and attracted attention by their goings on, I felt as if I would give the world to get away." Here she broke down and commenced crying again, but after a little she continued: "Well, I tried so hard to get out of sight that as we were coming out I lost sight of the girls, and then I missed my way; and when I got to the station the train had gone, and I had to wait till the next one, which didn't come till nearly twelve o'clock, and I had to come all alone; and oh, Theo, I was so scared I felt as if I should die with fright. Don't tell auntie! Oh, what shall I do if Archie should find it out?" And Val, still shaking and sobbing, refused to be comforted, till finally Theo, by promises and caresses, calmed the excited girl, and she fell asleep with Theo still holding her closely.

Such a heavy-eyed, pale-faced pair made their appearance at the breakfast-table that Miss Nelson suspected strongly that something must be wrong, but she said nothing, trusting Theo's character implicitly, and knowing when the time came, if her advice were needed, the confidence would be given. She noticed that Val started every time the door opened, and that she cast appealing looks after Theo if she left the room, flushing up to her eyes if she saw Miss Nelson looking at her. Theo was scarcely less unhappy, and felt that a share of the disgrace which Val considered hers fell also upon herself.

"I wish you would tell auntie," she begged of Val. "I have never kept anything from her, and she always knows just the right thing to say."

"Oh, I can't! I can't!" cried Val, wringing her hands. "I can't do it, Theo. She would lose all respect for me."

"You don't know auntie," protested Theo, in distress. "I know she could help you." But Val would not consent, and for a week the affair burdened the hearts of the two girls, when, at the end of that time, something occurred to force Val's confidence, and this something was a visit from Archie. The girls at school wondered what was wrong with Val Le Moyne. The party had missed her at the train, but, supposing she did not wish to be seen with them after her denouncement of their behavior, concluded she had gone into another car, perhaps under the care of some friend of the family. So they gave themselves little concern as to the manner of her return. Val was thankful for this, and, since they chose to take offence at what they considered her ill treatment of them, the intimacy with Fly and her comrades ceased, and Val attached herself closely to Theo, rewarded by Theo's unwavering affection and thoughtful care of her feelings. So by the close of the week Val had recovered her spirits, when the sudden appearance of Archie on Friday evening made them go down again to zero.

Theo and Val were taking their supper when Archie walked in. He stooped to kiss Theo, who flew at him in perfect rapture, but he only nodded to Val, and asked, "Where is auntie?"

"You know this is the evening she always spends with Miss Madeline," replied Theo, looking at her brother's serious face with a perturbed feeling.

"So it is: I had forgotten." And he seated himself at the table.

"Oh, Archie," began Theo, "it is so good to see you! Do tell us all about everything. How are you getting along?"

"First-rate," was the reply. "I'll tell you all about it to-morrow, when auntie is here. I'm going after her. I want to see her particularly." And he left the room.

"Oh, Theo, he knows!" exclaimed Val, blanched with terror.

"I'm afraid he does," replied Theo. "Never mind, Val, auntie will make it all right," secure in her trust of Miss Janet. "You will tell her now, won't you?"

"I shall have to." And Val began to cry. "You'll come with me, won't you, Theo?"

"Of course, if you want me to," she consented, dreading the interview almost as much as Val.

About nine o'clock Archie returned with Miss Janet, and the two went directly to the sitting-room, where they were closeted for half an hour; then Archie opened the door of the dining-room, where the girls were still sitting, and said, "Theo, auntie wants to speak to you;" then he went out the front door, and they heard the gate shut after him.

"Come," said Theo, holding out her hand to Val, who shrank back for a moment, then, tightly clasping each other's hands, they went up to Miss Nelson.

A pause at the door. There were tears in Miss

Nelson's eyes, but she held out her arms, and Val ran to her, burying her head on the loving breast and sobbing out her confession, while Miss Nelson listened silently, stroking the dark hair, and laying her cheek lovingly against the little head.

"But you will never do so again, Val?" she said.

"Never, never!" was the reply. "Oh, auntie, you won't stop loving me?"

"Stop loving you! My poor little lamb, no indeed. But you must tell me, Val, what attracted you, and just how you feel about those girls. I must know the needs of your nature, dear, or I cannot help you. Speak to me as you would to your own heart. Or perhaps you would rather I should say what I think. In the first place, you are fond of admiration, and you didn't like to have the girls consider you slow and stupid: so when they flattered you and sought your society, you thought how nice it was. Didn't you?"

"Yes," responded Val, meekly.

"And then you began to think their talk of fun and dress and their little gossip much more amusing than questions of algebra and history, and you loved pleasure more than duty, so you thought it much nicer to join a set who did not attach any importance to brains, but thought a good time the main thing."

"Oh, auntie!" deprecatingly from Val.

"And you said to yourself, 'There is no harm in just going to a concert.' Then the stealing away was such a delightful excitement,—forbidden fruit being so sweet,—and you thought it much greater fun than to go with my consent."

"Oh, auntie!" again from Val.

"You see, dear," continued Miss Janet, sitting down on the lounge and drawing Val to her side, "your old auntie has not been old so long but what she can remember how life looks to a very young girl. I knew your dear mother too well to think her daughter could be wilfully and entirely an unscrupulous, headstrong girl. The girls with whom you have been associating are much older than you; the influences and examples they have had have not always been the best, and I know their wildness and their exciting talk had a fascination for you, and it is human nature for us to enjoy in greater measure that which we take some risk to gain than that which comes to us easily. An adventure is dear to the heart of most young people. I cannot deny but what it yet has its charm even for me. Now, tell me exactly where you think you were wrong."

Val was silent a moment, then said, in a low voice, "I was wrong in deceiving you, and then I was wrong in going with girls who did not behave like ladies, and I was wrong in liking fun more than anything else."

"Then, dear child, I shall trust your own sense of right for the future. You are so young and do not realize that the world is full of snares and pitfalls for innocent, untried feet. I want you to remember one thing,—write it on your heart of hearts, say it over whenever you feel uncertain: 'Nothing can bring you peace but yourself; nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principle.' That is all, dear. Now go with Theo and ask her to show you where to find the quotation; it is in one of my favorite books, and

it is growing to be one of Theo's too, so I want it to be yours."

"Oh, Theo," exclaimed Val, as the two left the room, "how dear, how dear she is! What is the book? I *will* learn that, and say it over and over."

Then Theo took her up-stairs, and from her little book-shelf took down a volume of Emerson's Essays.

"It is at the end of Emerson's essay on 'Self-Reliance,'" said Theo.

"But oh, Theo, what a terribly deep book! I could never learn to love it."

"You will when you have known auntie as long as I have," replied Theo. "Of course I don't understand everything, but every little while I grow up to some thought, and it delights me when I do. Auntie says that if we put our ideals above us, we grow upward towards them, but if they are below, we must sink. And Archie says if you aim at the church steeple you may hit the roof, whereas if you only aim at the roof you may not get above the door."

"Then I will aim high." And Val's face shone with new resolution.

With the uncompromising severity of youth, Archie was not ready to condone Val's offence at once, and treated her with a coolness that went sorely to the poor little girl's heart, for approbation was the delight of her soul, and to feel that she was suffering from any one's displeasure was, perhaps, the greatest punishment she could have endured.

She went up to him on the Sunday afternoon of his first visit and put her hand on his arm, giving him

such a beseeching look as would have melted a much sterner heart.

"Oh, pshaw, Val!" he ejaculated, giving himself a little fling, "I don't want to be hard on you, but, I say, if those girls knew what boys think of them when they are so fresh and giddy, they would be more careful. I tell you, it cuts like thunder to hear the fellows talk about those girls and know you were one of them. Of course a fellow is going to amuse himself when a girl acts that way, but I tell you if they think it is because the boys admire them they are mistaken. If a girl makes herself conspicuous that way in public, it is a pretty sure sign that she isn't worth much respect."

"I tried to keep out of sight," expostulated Val, "and, oh, Archie, I didn't giggle and laugh loud and talk at people the way those girls did."

"No, but you were with them, and of course any one would think you were the same kind of a girl, or you wouldn't be with them. Now, you know I go in for fun as much as anybody, but it is one thing to have fun and another to make a show of yourself. Why, if any one of those fellows had thought his sister was one of that crowd it would have made him drop."

"Do you think any one of them knew who I was?" inquired Val, her heart beating under this denouncement, couched though it was in not very elegant language.

"Maybe they didn't," admitted Archie, softening visibly at the sight of Val's pathetic eyes; "but I knew, and that was enough."

Val turned away without another word, and Archie,

feeling himself rather brutally unkind, followed her, to see the tears running down her cheeks, though she bravely tried to smile through them. This sight increased his self-reproach, and he put out his hand, saying,—

"There, Val, perhaps I had no right to haul you over the coals, but you haven't any brother, and now you are one of the family some one must look out for you. Maybe I was too harsh; though what I said is all true. Let's be friends."

"Oh, will you?" exclaimed Val, so delightedly that Archie felt his advances were at least appreciated, and were not made too soon.

So the matter ended, and little Val, passing through her season of fire, came out doubly refined; but she never forgot the lesson.

CHAPTER V.

A NOVEMBER LUNCHEON.

ARCHIE came and went, leaving a void behind him at each departure, and bringing life and brightness with each successive visit.

The girls worked away at school, making good progress.

October passed, and November days were beginning.

"It is too bad," said Miss Janet, standing one day on the porch, "that November should be so maligned. Could anything be more lovely than those autumn browns and purples, or more spicy sweet than the up-drifting odor of the fallen leaves? It seems to me the very hint of frost in the air gives an added energy to us, while the lingering softness keeps away the chill."

"Oh, auntie!" exclaimed Theo, at her side, "I have such a lovely thought."

"No, it's a secret, Val," shaking her head laughingly at that small person, who was feeding Ishmael. "Come, auntie, before my idea gets cold.—Ishmael wants you, Val: you can't come." And Theo led the way into the house, followed by Miss Nelson.

"Now, auntie," commenced Theo, "you know I have been just longing to have a little luncheon, or

tea, or dinner, or something, for Val, and you said, you know, that we could not afford a regular stylish affair; but I have thought of something perfectly lovely. Let us give a November luncheon: it will not cost anything, hardly, the way I want it, and it will be so unique. Say yes, auntie."

"Well, if it will not cost anything, hardly, my chief objection is removed. Let me know, when you have thought it out, exactly what it will cost, and then we will see."

"Don't tell Val," besought Theo, "till it is all settled."

Miss Nelson promised not to divulge the plan, but, as she expected, Val assailed her with questions.

"I think it is real mean of Theo," she complained, "not to tell me. Auntie, please tell me."

Auntie shook her head.

"Why not?" persisted Val.

"Because I have no right. Did it never occur to you, Val, what a secret is? It is something that belongs to one person given into another's charge. You would not think of asking me to give you Theo's pocket-book if you knew it to be in my possession, and I have no more right to share this with you than I have to share the contents of Theo's purse. Indeed, I have less right; for I could replace the money, but a confidence once given can never be restored. So it is not only dishonest, but treacherous." This was a new way of looking at the question, and Val made no more inquiries.

But it was not long before Theo revealed the secret,

and, Miss Janet's consent being obtained, the invitations were given to and accepted by nine of the girls with whom Theo and Val were most intimate.

There was a delightful suggestion attached to the invitations, at Miss Nelson's prompting, which was that each guest should contribute something in November's praise,—a story, a sketch, a poem, or whatever suggested itself. Each contribution was to be dropped into a little basket upon the entrance of the contributor into the house. No signatures were to be attached, but at the table these November tributes were to be discussed, votes were to be taken, and a prize was to be awarded by Miss Nelson for the best production.

Such excitement among the girls, such knitting of brows, and scribbling! Even Miss Janet was to be found writing away with an absorbed look on her face.

A week later the luncheon took place, and who shall say the table was not as fine as any decked with exotics and costly favors?

The table decorations were all of November's giving. Under each plate was a mat of shining brown leaves, skilfully tacked with a needle and thread to the cloth; a mat of the same glossy bronze held the centre-piece, which was nothing more nor less than a royal pumpkin hollowed out; it held the autumn fruits, apples, pears, and grapes, making as fine a piece of coloring as one would wish to see,—this fluted bowl of nature's own modelling, painted in such rich tones by that great master, the sun; at either end of the table stood a slim-necked jug, holding delicate brown weeds, whose seed-pods were as daintily graceful as ever flower could

be; large acorns, shaved across the bottom so they would stand well, held the salt; the luncheon-cards were oak leaves of every variety,—no vellum half so smooth, no gilding half so finely laid on. And November's praise was never more fully sung. There were poems, "The November Lamp," "Mother November;" there was a charade, an enigma; there was a sketch of a lane bordered by leafless trees, which showed all the beauty of their fine drawing against a clear sky; by the side of the lane stretched away a cornfield with the yellow stacks heaped high, while off in the distance loomed the purple hills. They all knew the spot, and forthwith called the little nameless road "November Lane."

Miss Janet read a charming bit of prose-poetry which brought tears to the eyes of the audience, for all knew the frosts were already touching her dear head, and that the rustle of the autumn leaves typified her autumn-tide; but they were laughing in a few minutes till the tears came back again at an absurd little play giving such ridiculous prophecies that they all grew merrier and merrier, till never Christmas Day brought more mirth.

The girls were so interested in the oak leaves, and so surprised at discovering there was such a large variety to be found, that Miss Janet read them Thoreau's "Autumnal Tints;" after which Nannie declared she should at once begin to make the book "October or Autumnal Tints," which Thoreau suggests. Then each girl begged to be permitted to carry away her salt-cellar with her luncheon-card. Theo and Val had dis-

tinguished themselves in preparing the list of dishes, and, to carry out their scheme of color, dressed themselves in brown, as did also Miss Janet. They had carefully thought over the dishes whose brownness should be a distinguishing feature. So, bouillon first, fish with brown sauce, followed by browned potatoes and chops, brown bread, chocolate ice-cream and cake, were some of the articles contained in the bill of fare. There were also caramels, delicious home-made ones, in little baskets decorated with brown ribbons. When the votes were counted it was found there was a tie, six being for "A November Prophecy," the funniest sort of a little comedy, in which each one's hobby was so cleverly burlesqued that the girls laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks; the other six were for the sketch.

"I have provided for this," said Miss Nelson, "and if the two contributors will signify their claims they shall each have a prize."

Every one suspected the sketch to be Nannie Talcott's; but when Val blushingly claimed authorship of the little comedy, every one save Miss Nelson was astonished.

With a smile, Miss Nelson handed Val a copy of Emerson's Essays, and to Nannie Thoreau's "Excursions."

"I believe you knew," whispered Val, as she went up to Miss Janet; but that lady only smiled wisely, and Val could not discover her thought.

"We never had such a good time in our lives," said the girls. "It was the prettiest luncheon that ever

was." And with such-like expressions of appreciation they took their leave.

"I am so glad, Val," exclaimed Theo. "I never dreamed you were so clever. How did you think of it?" And Theo began to laugh at the remembrance of Val's wit.

Val bore her honors very modestly, but the affair won her a new place in the school among those girls who had doubted her ability before, and she felt it was very sweet to have the respect of such girls as Nannie Talcott, whose praise was given unaffectedly and freely.

The university was not so far away but that Archie could make a visit home every two or three weeks. These visits were anticipated with the keenest pleasure by the girls, who were never tired of hearing about the students' exploits, and were stanch partisans of the Freshman class, resenting the tricks and triumphs of the Sophomores as of their sworn enemies: so one week when Archie wrote, "We have just outwitted the Sophs finely," the girls could scarcely wait till the following Saturday should bring Archie home, and he was hardly in the house before both cried, "Oh, Archie, tell us, what have you done to the Sophs?"

Always ready to tease, Archie bent upon them a blank look, saying, "The Sophs are all right. What do you mean? They still exist, collectively and individually. Who said they did not? One would suppose that they were exterminated from the face of the earth, to hear you talk. 'What have I done to the Sophs?' Am I a Samson, that I with the jaw-bone of an ass can kill a thousand men? One would suppose

my hands were reeking with innocent blood,—that I had set upon the Sophs in a moment of frenzy and demolished them, root and branch."

"We didn't mean just you," explained Theo, while Val began to laugh: "we meant you Freshmen."

"Well, we Freshmen. Murder is still considered a crime, Theo, in this enlightened age. I admit the Sophs are at times very trying; but that we Freshmen should be charged with having spirited them away, or that we should be held accountable for their whereabouts, is a little too much. We have already borne a great deal, but this is beyond endurance."

"Oh, nonsense, Archie!" put in Val. "You are the most absurd boy. Talk about the jaw of an ass——"

"Val, you inelegant creature, you are actually coarse," expostulated Archie, bursting out laughing. "Your wit is finer than your choice of language, but I forgive your insinuation. Now, what is it you want to know?"

"We want to know, if we must be so explicit, to what you were referring when you wrote, 'We have just outwitted the Sophs finely.' We have been consumed with curiosity ever since your letter came."

"Really?" asked Archie, teasingly, showing no disposition to gratify them.

"Auntie, make him tell us."

Auntie looked up quizzically and remarked, "You have heard the old adage, haven't you,—'You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink'?"

"'Drink, pretty creature, drink,'" coaxed Val, with ready wit, patting Archie.

"Well," said Archie, "since you are so very flattering,—although I must decline to be addressed as was Barbara Lewthwaite's pet lamb: as Lady Jane says, I am 'not pretty, but massive." And he stretched forth a sturdy arm.

"Go on," interrupted Theo, impatiently. "I declare to goodness, Archie, you are enough to try the patience of a saint with your foolishness."

"Then I won't talk," responded Archie.

"Let him alone, girls," advised Miss Janet: "he will be only too glad to talk as soon as he finds out you don't care to hear him."

"True, O queen!" returned Archie. "And so, that such a painful moment may never arrive, here goes. You know we have been standing all sorts of bully-ragging from the Sophs, and we decided we would get even with them. So Jack Allen, Gil Rogers, and I put our heads together and watched our opportunity, which was not very long in coming. We heard the Sophs were going to have a big blow-out,—an oyster supper at Kelly's. Kelly is the man that keeps the hotel, you know. They were going to have a private dining-room and have great larks. So we made up our minds they should never enjoy that supper. We lay very low about it till the day before it was to come off, and not a Soph suspected what we were up to. In the mean time the word had been passed around among the Freshs that every mother's son of them must be on hand the next evening at seven o'clock. Then we

went to Kelly and told him we were some of the fellows that wanted the supper, and that we were afraid some of the other boys would contrive to get it from us, so we wanted him to have everything ready at half-past seven instead of half-past eight, as had been originally ordered; and he was to let no one in without a password, which we gave him. If any one came without the password, he was to know it was one of the wrong party. 'Of course,' we said, 'they'll kick up a fuss and pretend they are the right ones; but don't you pay any attention to them.'"

"Oh, how smart!" cried Val, clapping her hands.

"We said," Archie went on, "that we would come in the back way, so no one could see us, for if any of the wrong fellows were to see us they might get together and make a rush. Well, sir, the fellows were on hand in force, I tell you; we all got safely in, and we were nearly through supper when the Sophs began to come. I tell you there was fun: you ought to have heard them storm: it was as good as a circus. They protested, they coaxed, they offered bribes, but no use; Kelly stood his ground like a little man,—he just grinned at them. They couldn't batter down the doors without being arrested. So there we sat as serene as you please, gobbling down their supper."

"What did they do?" asked Theo, breathless with interest.

"Do! they couldn't do anything. It was too good a joke on them, and they had to give in finally that we had the best of it; but they don't think we are such sap-heads as they did."

"Oh, wasn't it a joke!" cried the girls.

"Archie, I think it was splendid," pronounced Theo. "I wish you could do something else."

"Listen to the children, auntie," laughed Archie: "they are like a pair of babies crying for more. By the way, auntie, I want Gilbert Rogers and Jack Allen here for the holidays, if I may have them. They are nice fellows. Gil lives so far off he can't go home, and Jack hasn't any home; he has a snuffy old guardian, or uncle, or something, and I know it would be worth lots to him to have a real Christmas for once in his life."

"Of course they may come," returned auntie, her sympathies at once aroused. "They can have the spare room."

"And if Nannie Talcott could come too,—you know she never goes home at Christmas, either!" exclaimed Theo. "She could share my room."

"Very well," said auntie, laughing. "It is a pretty big brood, Theo, for my wings to cover, but no doubt I can manage it."

At this moment mammy put her head in the door and announced that Mrs. Reed wanted to see Miss Janet.

"That reminds me of my friend Ishmael. How is he, The?" asked Archie.

"Oh, he is very well, and so cunning." And Theo launched forth into a lively account of Ishmael's attractions. "His last fancy is to develop a taste for raw tomatoes: he devours a whole one at a time. Isn't it a strange taste for a cat? And he is so clever. What do you think he did the other day? I know you won't

believe this, Archie, but it is an actual fact. We were sitting at breakfast, and Ishmael, who never thinks of being anywhere but near me at meal-time, was sitting by my chair giving me little pats to draw my attention to him. I said, 'It would be much better, Ishmael, if you were to learn to find your own breakfast. Why don't you go up-stairs and catch that mouse I heard nibbling in my room last night? It kept me awake, and you ought to rid me of it.' Then what did Ishmael do but wave his tail and turn deliberately around and leave the room. In a few minutes he came back with a little mouse, which he brought directly to me. Say what you will about it, I know he understood me; for you know he never before left the room at meal-time, and I have never heard the mouse since."

Archie laughed heartily at this tale, and, as every one vouched for its truth, he came to the conclusion that Ishmael was an extraordinarily intelligent cat, a fact which Theo heartily endorsed.

CHAPTER VI.

ELDORADO ANN.

As they were discussing Ishmael's merits, Miss Janet came in with a grave face.

"What is it, auntie?" questioned Theo.

"Poor Mrs. Reed is in a peck of trouble," replied Miss Janet: "the children are all down with the measles, and poor little Eldorado Ann is so ill that the doctor says she is in danger unless she can be kept very quiet, a thing it is impossible for Mrs. Reed to do when there are so many huddled together, and the poor woman is at her wits' ends to find out some feasible plan. She could manage the rest very well, but Eldorado Ann requires constant care, and who is there to give it?"

"Oh, auntie!" exclaimed Theo, then she stopped.

"What were you going to say, dear?" inquired her aunt.

"I was wondering," hesitated Theo,—"I was wondering if we could bring the poor little creature up here: she could be put in my room, you know how quiet it is there, and I could nurse her. I am not the least afraid. You know I have had the measles, and I am sure I could take care of her."

"But your school," objected Miss Janet: "you would

have to stay away. I think Mrs. McCleary is very particular in such cases."

"Oh, I can study and make up my lost lessons. I could catch up with the class, indeed I could, auntie. Do let me!"

"Why, Theo," said Val, "I thought you despised that Reed family."

"I do," admitted Theo, "and that is why I want to take care of this poor little thing. I can imagine, if I were ill, how miserable it would be there. It is bad enough for one who is well, but think how her poor little head must ache.—You are willing, aren't you, auntie?"

"Yes, dear," Miss Nelson assented, after a moment's thought: "we will share the nursing, and I hope we may bring our little patient out all right."

Archie walked to the window, looking out, with his hands thrust in his pocket. Presently he burst out with, "How are you going to get her up here?"

Theo looked at her aunt in perplexity. "I don't know," she rejoined. "How shall we manage, auntie?"

"I'll bring her," offered Archie, brusquely. "She isn't very big."

Theo said nothing, knowing her brother's dislike to much demonstration upon such occasions; but as she passed him she stopped just a moment and laid her cheek against his sleeve. So a procession was formed, and, carrying blankets and pillows, the family made their way to the Reeds' house, and, securely wrapped up in blankets, not even the tip of her nose showing, Eldorado Ann was borne safely in Archie's strong

arms and deposited in Theo's bed, a cot being provided for Theo herself. For days they watched the little patient. She was supplied with every comfort, and the young nurse was indefatigable in her ministrations. At first there seemed a doubt of the sick child's recovery, and Theo watched by the bedside with a feeling of dread, but at last all went well, and Eldorado Ann was able to sit up in bed, drinking her tea from one of Theo's pretty little cups and eating toast from the same plate that had charmed Theo in her childhood by its little bunches of flowers on a white ground.

It was a very hollow-eyed little face that smiled from the pillows at her tender young nurse, and Theo, who had learned during these anxious days to love her little charge, felt grieved to think the time would soon come when she must give the child back to her mother and to the miserable life she knew must await her.

"How old are you, Eldorado Ann?" she asked one day. Somehow, no one ever addressed the child but by her two names.

"I'm ten goin' on 'leven," replied she.

"You are getting quite a big girl."

"Yes'm," assented Eldorado Ann. "Tommy he comes next; he's mos' twelve; an' Almiry she's fourteen."

"There are a lot of you, aren't there?"

"Yes'm; there's Emmeline, an' Imogene, an' Marcellus, an' Timothy, an' the baby,—her name's Pearl."

Theo smiled at the thought of how the infant belied her name, never being in that state of purity and whiteness suggested by such an appellation.

"They are all quite well again," Theo informed her. "I suppose you are very glad of that?"

"Yes," responded Eldorado Ann, "I s'pose I am, but there's so many I reckon ma could get along better if there were one or two dead. Pap he doesn't do nothin' for us, you know; he jest sets and chaws terbaccy."

"Why, Eldorado Ann! you mustn't talk that way," Theo protested, shocked by this want of feeling.

Eldorado Ann regarded her a minute with her great eyes. "When there ain't room for so many, I don't see why they have to stay. Ma says, though, it's cheaper to raise 'em than it is to bury 'em. She's buried two, an' it cost forty dollar; she ain't done payin' fer it yet. I heerd her say so. I know forty dollar would more than take keer of me all my life, but I jest as soon died here in this nice, pretty little room as not."

"Why, Eldorado Ann!" again exclaimed Theo, feeling great compassion for the poor child, "I think it is dreadful to feel that way."

"You wouldn't if you was me," replied the little girl. "I don't want to git well, Miss Theo. I'd like to be sick for ever and ever, so as to stay in this room an' never go out."

Theo sat thoughtfully rocking back and forth in her little low sewing-chair. She was altering some of her own outgrown garments for Eldorado Ann, and as she plied her needle she wondered how she could lift this little life out of the mire into which it seemed inevitable it must fall.

"Try to go to sleep, Eldorado Ann," she said, presently, "and I will sing to you." And, rising, she lightly beat up the pillows, and settled Eldorado Ann down for a nap, while she sang a soothing little song; and when Miss Janet entered the room with a cup of beef tea, Eldorado Ann was lying with a peaceful smile on the pinched, wan little face.

Theo raised a warning finger, and Miss Janet set the cup down, coming softly to where Theo was sitting and taking a seat on the divan near her.

"How is she?" she whispered.

"Better, I think," was Theo's reply; "but, poor little tot, what a dreadful thing for her to go back to her miserable home! Auntie," suddenly laying a supplicating hand on her aunt's arm, "can't we keep her here? She could be of so much use to mammy, if we can persuade mammy to think so, and there will be clothes enough of Val's and mine for her. Say yes, auntie," leaning her cheek down upon the hand that was now holding hers.

"I shall have to think of it," Miss Janet replied. "Perhaps the mother will not consent, even if we can overrule mammy's objections. Hush! there, the child is waking."

At the first opportunity Theo assailed mammy with coaxings and cajoleries. "Now, mammy," she urged, "don't you want to do something for your baby?"

"Sutt'nly I does, honey," acquiesced mammy. "What is yoh up to now?"

"Well, I want to take Eldorado Ann into the house and save your old steps."

"Law, chile, yoh is askin' too much. Yoh know mammy do a heap fo' yoh, but she ain't no use fo' po' white trash."

"I know it, mammy, and the Reeds are a horrid set."

"Yass, miss, dey sutt'nly is dat, an' yoh hab de whole tribe a-runnin' an' a-makin' free ob dese premises ef you let one in. Dey jes' like dese yere pestiferous little red ants: yoh let 'em once git in dey ain't no way to git rid ob 'em. I knows, honey, I knows."

"Of course you know. You're a dreadfully wise old mammy; I always said so. Poor little Eldorado Ann! I suppose she's got to go back to that miserable life. I think I might make something of her if I could have her here, but of course I wouldn't make you miserable, mammy."

Mammy drew down her mouth and cast side-glances at Theo, every now and then ducking her head and frowning.

Theo sat silent, looking very thoughtful, and once she drew a long sigh, but she did not pay any attention to mammy, knowing she was much disturbed and must have time to consider the matter.

The dear, faithful old soul was devoted to the family, and it disturbed her greatly to have her baby, as she called Theo, ask a favor which it was very hard for her to grant, and so she finally gave in, and said,—

"Well, chile, ef yoh kin keep dem little warmints back from traipsin' over my clean kitchen, yoh ole mammy ain't gwine ter stan' in de way ob yoh pleasure."

"Oh, mammy," cried Theo, starting up, "you are a

dear old thing! You shall have the finest funeral in the land." This was mammy's highest ambition,—a fine funeral. She belonged to no less than three societies, each of which proposed to see that she was well buried, and Theo often teased the old woman by saying she wasn't going to see her buried three times.

"All right, honey," replied mammy to Theo's teasing remark. "I reckon I git bu'y'd all right. I ain't got but one dequest to make about it: Don't let 'em bu'y me on de side ob a hill. I doesn't want to stan' up till de day ob jedgment."

This ghastly prospect was too much for Theo, and she left the kitchen to seek her aunt, to whom she gave an account of her interview with mammy. Fortunately, auntie had another piece of good news in the fact that the Reeds were going to move away, and so mammy would have little to fear from them. Mrs. Reed had consented to Eldorado Ann's taking up her residence with Miss Nelson, the argument of one less mouth to feed being too strong for her, though she was rather loath to allow the child to go "out to service," for the poor woman had an idea of making "ladies" of her daughters, her unpractical ideas being one of the causes of the uncomfortable condition in which the whole family lived. Miss Nelson's arguments overcame her objections, however, and Eldorado Ann became a member of the household.

It was some time before the child was strong enough to begin to make herself useful, and there seemed danger of her being spoiled. Foreseeing this, Miss Nelson concluded upon her recovery that a visit home

would do the child no harm; but before the week was out Eldorado Ann came back, begging to be allowed to go to work.

A little room over the pantry being fitted up in the simplest manner for her, she took possession, and, under mammy's training, soon became a valuable little handmaid.

It required, however, all Theo's ingenuity to keep her clean. Threats and bribes did no good, and she went about in such an untidy state that Theo was in despair. She finally hit upon a plan which, in the end, proved the best punishment: Eldorado Ann was excluded from the dining-room and other parts of the house where the family were accustomed to meet. So, as she dearly liked to wait upon the table and hear the bright talk that went on, she soon began to pay more attention to her personal cleanness, and, although there were frequent lapses, Theo had hopes that she would overcome the fault eventually.

CHAPTER VII.

ABOUT CHRISTMAS-GIFTS.

As the holidays approached, the girls' excitement over their gifts and their interest in the prospective visitors increased.

Theo's room made the cosiest spot possible for secrets, and thither Theo and Val betook themselves in the afternoons when school was over. The little wood-stove crackled and roared away, heating up the room in a few minutes.

"Dear me! it does get dark so soon," observed Val, drawing nearer and nearer the window. "Theo, you will really have to light the lamp in a few minutes."

"That is true," answered Theo, with a sigh, as she hitched her chair nearer the light. "Val, I am in the greatest dilemma about Archie's Christmas-gift. It is so hard to know what to give a boy. Dear me! do you know I have been thinking we shall have to give all the company something, and I am at my wits' ends now."

"Oh, I shall just buy little books, or something," returned Val.

"Yes, I know; it's all well enough for you, but I haven't as much money as you have and it is spread

out so thin now that I don't see how I can make it go any further, and I haven't a single thing for dear, blessed old Arch."

"Let me loan you some," offered Val, generously; "you know the colonel is sure to send me money at Christmas; he always does. Doesn't it seem funny to have a guardian you have never seen? I think he must be rather a queer old fellow."

"Auntie is our guardian," observed Theo. "Dear auntie! We haven't any too much, you know. This place was papa's and auntie's and so of course we all have an equal share in it, which makes it very nice, but I know it is going to be a tight squeeze to get Archie through college."

"I wish I could help," sighed Val.

"You do help!" affirmed Theo, vehemently. "You don't know what a help you are. I heard auntie talking to Archie one day, and she was saying our income was less than ever before. I don't know just how it is, but I know you help out."

"Well, I am glad enough," returned Val, vainly trying to thread her needle by the dim light; "but you will let me loan you something for Archie's present?"

"You are very good," replied Theo, "but I should rather not, if I can get along without: maybe something will come into my head that doesn't cost anything. Won't this table-cover for auntie be lovely, if it is only blue denims? I shall really have to light the lamp, for I can scarcely see." And, drawing their chairs to the table, the girls worked away with flying fingers by lamplight.

"Isn't it queer," remarked Val, "that, no matter how early you begin, you never are quite ready for Christmas? Theo, don't you think it would be lots of fun to hang up our stockings—I mean for everybody to—and put all sorts of ridiculous things in them?"

"It would be fun," assented Theo. "What shall we put in them?"

"Oh, I don't know,—jumping-jacks and candy toys, and any little funny things we can find."

"So we will; and it will be such fun to buy them; but then I have only a quarter left, and I was saving that towards Archie's present."

"Well, never mind: I told you I had plenty."

"Then when I settle what I am to give Archie I will borrow," concluded Theo; "though I know auntie would not like me to."

"Oh, well, of course—from a stranger; but I am different."

"Cousin Betsey Preston offered to loan me some money once for something I wanted very much, but auntie would not let me borrow: she says it is the habit we must avoid."

"Well, I know: she probably did not want you to set Archie the example, for boys at college get into such scrapes."

"Maybe that was it," said Theo, anxious to excuse herself if driven to borrow from Val.

"What did you do that time? What did Cousin Betsey say?"

"Oh, she went off and bought me what I wanted:

it was a book. Poor Cousin Betsey, she never likes me to go without anything I want; so since then I do not dare to wish for anything very much before her."

Presently a footstep was heard upon the stair. "There comes Eldorado Ann, Val!" exclaimed Theo. "Hide everything quickly; I wouldn't have her see for the world; she might tell." And the girls slipped their work under the table, and each picked up a book as Eldorado Ann's knock was heard at the door.

A few days later Theo came in with a radiant face. "Oh, auntie!" she said, "I am going to have the nicest present for Archie. I was talking to Nannie Talcott to-day,—you know how well she paints, and you know the little art club to which she belongs; well, she says each member has to provide a model for six sittings, and if I will be the model next time she will try to make a good portrait of me and give me her study to give Archie."

"Won't that be lovely?" asked Val, who had heard of the project on the way home.

"Yes, very nice indeed," replied Miss Nelson; "but, Theo, will it not put you back very much in your holiday work?"

"I am afraid it will," acknowledged Theo.

"Then perhaps, dear, if you are making anything for me, you will let it go till you have more time; I shall be quite as pleased with the unfinished work. You have only just caught up with your class, and I am afraid it will be too much for you to work so hard. I don't want my baby to break down and lose all her

roses: so you must promise me you will let my gift go till the last."

"Well," consented Theo, "I promise; but now that I do not have anything to make for Archie, I can devote that time to my sittings."

The next afternoon the little club met, and Theo was installed as model for them. She did not know all the members, and felt very shy as she was perched up on the model-stand to be gazed at and commented upon.

"Isn't it lovely!" exclaimed one of the girls. "Did you ever see such color?" Theo flushed up to the roots of her hair, and they all laughed.

"Isn't that glint on the hair exquisite?" said another.

"See, Nannie," observed a third, "those lines of the shoulders and neck: it makes me wild to begin. Hurry up, girls, and take your places, or I shall not be able to contain myself. Oh, you lovely thing!" kissing her hand to Theo. "A, B, C, who comes first?" And there followed a great dragging about of easels and walking around Theo, gazing at her from every point.

"I shall take the whole figure," said the one having first choice, "so I shall sit here. The drawing is perfectly lovely from this point."

"Well, I shall go in for color, and I want the best view of the face," declared Nannie Talcott, carefully choosing her position.

So by degrees the girls settled themselves, and there was silence for some time, broken only by an expression of rapture from some enthusiastic member.

There was a great holding up of pencils and brushes, squinting, with heads to one side, and after a while

Theo began to get quite tired of holding her head just so, for if she changed her position in the smallest degree some one would say, "A little more to the right, please," or, "Just a trifle more this way."

"She is getting quite pale," said one of the girls, vigorously squeezing out the tubes of paint upon her palette. "That will never do. There must be more color in it to make it as it was at first. Do make her blush, somebody." And in consequence the color went flying up into Theo's face, while the girls laughed at the success of the strategy.

The first hour passed easily enough, but by the end of the second Theo found herself waiting with a stiff neck and a tired back for the welcome word "Rest," and felt, when the time was up, that she was working very hard indeed for Archie's Christmas-gift.

"Isn't it delicious?" said one of the girls, as she rose reluctantly from her place. "You don't know how delightful you are, but you are terribly hard."

"So subtle," said another.

"And the coloring is simply impossible," remarked a third. "Oh, Nannie, what a nice beginning! You are sure to get a likeness."

"If I can only get my values all right," sighed Nannie, putting her work off from her and looking at it with an anxious eye. "Girls, doesn't that left eye seem a little out of drawing? I must have lost it when I began putting on the color, but I have looked at it so much I feel as if I were cross-eyed."

"Oh, I think it is all right," reassured the others. "Wait till you see it next time: you can tell better

then." And so, discussing and criticising, the girls lingered, and it was quite dark when Theo reached home.

She threw herself down on the lounge in the sitting-room, where she found her aunt and Val waiting for her.

"Well," inquired Val, "how did it go?"

Half laughing, half crying, Theo began to tell them. "You don't know," she said, "how perfectly ridiculous it did seem. Val, they called me 'it,' and talked about me as if I were not alive at all, or as if I were anything but a human being; and they talked about atmosphere, and values, and feeling, and said the most personal things to make me blush, so I could have color, till I felt like a perfect idiot."

Her aunt laughed. "You mustn't mind the jargon of the studios," she said; "it is very funny sometimes to outsiders, but they are very much in earnest, and it is very real to them. I can fancy those girls enjoyed every minute of their afternoon."

"You would think so if you had been there," returned Theo. "I suppose I shall get used to it, and shall pick up quite a lot of useful information by the time I have finished my sittings."

"How does your portrait look?"

"Very funny just now; it is all yellow and blue and red streaks, and looks rather queer to me, but the others were very enthusiastic; so no doubt it is all right."

And, as the result of the sittings proved, Theo was quite right, for Nannie made a very creditable portrait. Severe critics might have found fault with the tech-

nique and have criticised the color, but it was an unmistakable likeness, for Nannie had a gift in that direction, and all her friends, not being censorious, declared it wonderful. So Theo bore it home in triumph, and felt herself amply repaid for being called "it."

"And I still have my twenty-five cents for Christmas toys," she announced delightedly to Val. "We will go down-town and get them on Saturday. We won't even tell auntie; it will be such fun to keep it from everybody till the last minute."

School closed several days before Christmas, and the girls rejoiced that they could have a little time in which to finish up odds and ends. There was a great deal of whispering; of whisking things out of the way; of tying up packages in white tissue-paper with dainty ribbons; of watching for the mail and express parcels which might possibly come.

Miss Janet, with mammy as first assistant and Eldorado Ann as messenger, presided over the kitchen, from which place such savory odors issued, reaching even up to Theo's room, that the three girls—for Nannie's visit began with the holidays—would sniff and exclaim till Theo, in desperation, would fly down to the kitchen and bear forth a plate of hot gingersnaps or some turn-overs to be devoured by the girls, who would wonder why they were not hungry at the next meal.

Eldorado Ann was in a state of rapture never before experienced in her poor little life. She scraped dishes and pans, licked spoons and ate crumbs, till it was a

wonder she was not ill; while Ishmael, now that there were no more raw tomatoes to be had, developed a taste for baked pumpkin, and licked his chops complacently after gorging himself with the inside of a pumpkin-shell.

The three boys were expected any day; they had gone off hunting for a day or two, and promised to be back in plenty of time for any work which might be required of them.

So one evening they all came trooping in, and, as Miss Nelson said afterwards, then her trials began, for with six irrepressible, light-hearted young people in the house, it must be confessed it rang with noise from morning till night.

Archie's two friends, Gilbert Rogers and Jack Allen, were very different types. Archie himself was a tall, athletic fellow, rather unlike his sister as to features; his eyes were brown, hair darker, and his nose shorter than hers. Jack Allen was a match for him in size, but he was dark and swarthy, with a deep rich voice, and, though his manners lacked a little polish, he was evidently an honest, generous, warm-hearted boy, impulsive, yet giving one the sense of a reserve force which might make him a leader in either a good or a bad cause. Gilbert Rogers was different from either of the others: he was not very tall, but was quite a handsome boy, with an extremely gentle courteous manner, and a little attentive way that was very attractive. He was not a brilliant scholar, evidently, but stood well in his classes; he was a boy of good principles, but lacked the decision and resolution which made Jack's a stronger personality.

Miss Nelson looked over the little group the first evening of the boys' arrival, thinking of the different types of character and the various influences which each might exert over the others. She noticed the evident attraction Theo had for Jack Allen, and saw that Val's sprightly little ways entertained the quieter Gilbert, while Nannie and Archie, who were old friends, were carrying on an absorbing conversation in their turn.

"It is quite natural," said Miss Janet to herself, shaking her head wisely; "it is much better that they have these unrestrained friendships at home, where they are safe. Archie would never bring any but good boys to us, and I am satisfied with them all."

"Sing something, Theo," said Val presently.

"Oh, do," besought the others.

"No; let us have college songs," said Theo, with a sweet desire to give all a share. Her voice was very true and sympathetic and promised to be a fine one, though she was too modest ever to lay claim to any merit in it.

"Yes," assented Archie, jumping up, "let us all sing; Jack brought his banjo, and we'll have a regular time of it. Jack sings like a 'martingale,'" went on Archie. "You ought to hear him when he gets started. Come on, Johnny, my boy, give us your pipe."

Jack came forward, lending a rich baritone to the old college songs, which rang out with a freshness and vigor that could come only from young throats; while Miss Nelson sat and dreamed of the days when the same old room had echoed back the same well-known college

songs. The old university had been the alma mater of those whose voices so long silent now seemed to join in the merry-making. It was her brother Theodore who sang, and she was at the piano; while bending over her was one whose voice was forever stilled on the battle-field of Manassas, one whose love-letters lay hidden away from all eyes but her own. It all came back to her, how she and Cousin Betsey Preston had greeted her brother and his friend at Christmas-tide with such joy and delight that the very memory of it made her heart beat fast. She roused herself with a start from walking with these ghosts of a departed Christmas, and Theo, whose quick sympathies seemed to recognize her thought, came and leaned over her, softly kissing the top of her head, while Jack Allen, watching the little movement, felt his heart go out towards the aunt of his friends, and he, too, came over, and was soon entertaining them with a lively account of their hunting experiences.

The other four were gathered in a corner, from which such frequent peals of laughter issued as showed Archie was descanting in his usual nonsensical manner.

"You see, we fellows," he was saying, "are quite chums; Gil, there, isn't quite such a chum as Jack and I. Gil has a room-mate, one Edward Forrester,—Teddy for short. Teddy isn't a bad fellow, but Jack and I wonder that Gil should ever prefer him to us. Do you see how he can, Nannie? Now, Gil has a way of serving himself up, so to speak: he gives himself fresh to Teddy in the morning, warmed over to us at noon, and cold to Teddy again at night. We don't

exactly grudge Teddy his share, but it always will remain a mystery to us how Gil can prefer any one's company to ours."

"But he has selected your company for the holidays, evidently," observed Nannie.

"True; but I am always consumed with a doubt as to what he would have done if my invitation had not come first. He couldn't help himself, you know, even if Ted had wanted him after."

"Nonsense, Arch," put in Gilbert. "Ted hadn't half the attractions to offer that you have."

"So you see," Archie went on in a stage whisper, "after all it was a question of loaves and fishes."

"You are very absurd," commented Nannie, laughing, and, seeing that Gilbert really felt a little embarrassed, she changed the subject. "Tell us about your hunting expedition. What did you shoot?"

Archie began to laugh. "We shot a great many things, snakes principally and each other occasionally; the limb of a tree once in a while. I believe Gil brought down the top rail of a fence, and I know there is a bird of some kind going about still with a load of my shot in its tail feathers. As to Jack, he distinguished himself. We were going across a cornfield, when suddenly I saw Jack take aim at a figure ahead of us. It was a quaint old figure, with drooping shoulders and a dejected expression about the head. I pitied it from the bottom of my heart. There was an air about him, too, as if the old creature would say, 'I have fought long enough against "the whips and scorns of time;" I have done my best, and yet I have

come to this: let me live out my life in the free air.' I could fancy that faded old coat having graced the stalwart form of one of nature's noblemen; I could imagine with what native grace that torn and battered hat had once been lifted in courteous response to a greeting; I could——"

"Whew! isn't he getting eloquent?" interrupted Gilbert.

"Don't interrupt the speaker," commanded Archie, haughtily. "As I said, I could—I could—and I did see Jack, with murder in his eye, deliberately aim at this remnant of a grand old past, and riddle the bent and innocent form with shot."

"Oh!" exclaimed Nannie. "Was it a tramp? Did he hurt the poor old creature?"

"Would it hurt you," asked Archie, amid the peals of laughter that greeted Nannie's question, "to be riddled with shot?"

"It was only a scarecrow," whispered Val to Nannie.

"It was such an inoffensive old body," continued Archie, pretending not to notice Val's aside; "but then Jack is so heartless."

"We are all going into the woods for greens to-morrow," announced Theo from across the room.

"Greens! My dear Theo," answered Archie, "how ignorant you are! It is not the time of year for greens. Why not cabbage? Is it mammy who yearns for a dish of bacon and greens, that you must go on such a wild-goose chase? I am fond of the old soul, but I must say——"

"Silly boy! Christmas greens, to decorate the rooms: crowfoot, and holly, and such."

"Oh," said Archie, wagging his head, as if it were a new thought entirely, "I see."

The weather was not very cold, and the excursion to the woods was made with great success.

Aunt Janet thought she had never seen a prettier Christmas procession than that which brought home the long trailing wreaths of crowfoot, bright bunches of holly, and boughs of the soft, feathery white pine with which to adorn the house.

"It looks so Christmassy," said Theo, with delight, as she viewed their finished work.

"And it smells so Christmassy," pronounced Val.

"And it feels so Christmassy," said Archie, whisking a bit of pine across Theo's face and ears.

"It will feel more Christmassy to-morrow," returned she; "for it is getting colder every minute."

CHAPTER VIII.

HOLIDAYS.

"LOOK on your door-knobs first thing in the morning," said the girls as they all trooped merrily up-stairs after bidding the boys good-night.

"Hurry up, Val," called Theo over the baluster.

Val insisted upon putting the cot again in requisition, and had it placed in Theo's room, for on such an important occasion as this it was utterly impossible for Val to think of being separated from the other two.

"Where are the stockings?" demanded Theo. "Oh, here they are. Have you everything, Val?" as that person made her appearance with her arms piled up with packages. "That's right; just dump them down on the bed. Nannie, just drag out that basket; the oranges and apples are in it. What on earth did I do with the nuts? Oh, I know; they are in the closet." And, after much bustling about, the girls sat down on the floor with papers spread around them.

"I'll fill Nannie's stocking, and Val can fill mine, and Nannie can fill Val's," continued Theo. "Turn your back a minute, Val; there is something here you mustn't see.—Put that under your apron, Nannie," handing her a small package. "I am glad we put on aprons, they are so handy to hide things under."

"Let's divide the things into heaps," suggested Nannie, "and then it will be easier. There!" as this was satisfactorily accomplished. "What goes in first?"

"Let's fill auntie's stocking first: she must have the best," instructed Theo. "I am going to put this little tiny china doll into the toe of hers; let's wrap it up in ever so many papers first. Now that little mousey pen-wiper,—no, the heaviest things, I think, should go in next,—the orange and the apple. Now the nuts. Hand me the candy, girls, and the gingerbread person, —you cannot tell just what to call it, for it doesn't look like anybody 'in the heavens above, or the earth beneath, or the waters under the earth.' There, it is nearly full. Those candy toys are so brittle: I hope they won't break. One is broken; we'll have to eat that. Now on top goes the little mousey pen-wiper that is Ishmael's present to auntie. He has something for each of us: to Archie he is going to give a little pasteboard box trap like the one Archie caught the hen in, for that was the means of Ishmael's coming. Val and I made it, and we have put a little toy chicken inside. Isn't it a good joke on Arch to pay for some of his teasing? Then we have a toy banjo for Jack, and a gun for Gilbert, from Ishmael; he has something for you too, but we mustn't tell. There; they are all filled, except our own. Don't they look funny?"

"They are splendid," said Nannie. "I think you girls are so clever to think of such appropriate things. Whose is the monkey on the stick?"

"The monkey is Archie's, the jack-in-a-box is Jack's, and the little looking-glass is Gilbert's."

Gilbert was rather conscious of his good looks, and cast frequent glances at his budding moustache when he was near a mirror,—a fact which did not escape the quick eyes of the girls.

"Hold your apron, Nannie; here are Val's things. —You have mine, Val, haven't you?" asked Theo. "I have Nannie's. Now let us turn our backs on each other."

And, amid much laughter at the absurdity of the situation, the stockings were filled, even one for Eldorado Ann and one for mammy.

The girls lay awake, chattering like magpies, till after midnight; then they crept softly down-stairs and hung the stockings on the various door-knobs. They were awakened in the morning by shouts of laughter from the boys; then "Merry Christmas!" from below was answered by "Merry Christmas!" from above. The girls eagerly caught their own stockings from the bedposts where they hung, and, getting back again under the covers, amused themselves over the contents while the room was getting warm.

"I think Ishmael's presents are very funny," remarked Nannie, as she drew forth a tiny little bottle marked "catsup."

"See mine," said Theo, reading from a card, "'Some of Ishmael's relations.' What in the world——" And she unrolled a long bundle. "Catkins! Oh, Val, what a ridiculous joke!"

"Where is yours, Val?" asked Nannie.

Val held up a little bag of chestnuts bearing the inscription, "May you never be a cat's-paw."

"Goodness!" cried Theo, springing out of bed, "breakfast will be ready before we know it, and I am dying to see the real presents."

The big table in the sitting-room held quite a display. There were gifts useful and gifts ornamental, but perhaps none was more admired than Nannie's portrait of Theo, which held the place of honor, and of which Archie was very proud.

"It shall have the best place in my room," he said, something which Jack as his room-mate was secretly glad to hear, and how many times he stood before it in after-days no one knew. The big fellow's face was radiant. "It is the first real Christmas I have had since I was a little chap," he confided to Miss Janet, "and you don't know how good it is."

If Theo's present to Archie called forth the admiration of all, mammy's evoked their laughter. The devoted old woman never failed to give her "chilluns" something, usually a gift far too juvenile for their tastes, but this year she had been awakened to a sense of Archie's age by his going to college, and had purchased him a large handkerchief upon which an ornate "R" showed in red splendor.

"*R* for *Ar*chie," laughed Theo. "Bless dear old mammy, she can't read, and it sounded all right."

With many bobs and courtesies, mammy had gone out with her apron piled up with gifts. Eldorado Ann's face, in her effort to show appreciation of the occasion, had been scoured with soap till it shone, while her locks were soaped back till they hung in stiff strings about her ears. She, thinking it the proper thing,

also bobbed and courtesied, and was so laden down as she left the room that she kept dropping nuts and candies all the way out to the kitchen, a proceeding Ishmael considered specially designed for his amusement, as he rolled the nuts this way and that with his paw.

"Here, Ishmael," called Archie, as that stately individual walked in, "I have a crow to pick with you. After my rescuing you from a watery grave, to turn the tables on me by offering me such an uncomfortable reminder as your Christmas gift was base ingratitude. Come here." And Archie, who had been cracking walnuts, put a shell on each of Ishmael's feet.

"You poor dear," cried Theo, "he shall not tease you.—It is mean, Archie, to worry a poor little inoffensive animal. I should not have believed it of you." And though they all laughed to see Ishmael try to rid himself of his queer sabots, Theo took them off, and presented him with his Christmas-gifts. Her own was a big basket, in which he was to sleep. Val gave him a whisk-broom, as he dearly loved a brushing, and Nannie bestowed upon him a paper snake, to which he took such a fancy that he had severed it in several places before the day was over, but, as Theo patiently mended it each time, it still continued to be a source of delight to him.

After the presents had been thoroughly discussed, and the girls were tired of nibbling at the candies with which they were very plentifully supplied, Theo stood thoughtfully looking out of the window.

"What are you thinking about, Theo?" asked Val, interrupting the brown study.

"I was just thinking about the Reeds," she replied, "and wondering what I could take them."

"Who are the Reeds?" asked Jack, coming to the window where Theo stood.

Theo told him. "And they are so many," she said. "Of course Eldorado Ann has fared well, but that only makes it harder for the rest."

"I intended to send them a basket of supplies," remarked Miss Nelson. "Should you like to take it, Theo?"

"Oh, let me go with you!" begged Jack. "I can carry it. And perhaps there are some shops open; it would be such a pleasure to take them some toys. I don't know much about such things, but if you will help me, I should like very much to do it."

Theo gave him a grateful look, and consented to accept his services as joint almoner with herself, at the same time feeling a little conscience-stricken, for it was only the day before that she had been rather harsh in her criticism of her brother's friend; for Theo was a little inclined to be over-critical in some matters, and was apt to hold in lofty scorn all persons not perfectly correct in the little amenities of life.

"He is absolutely boorish," she declared to Archie. "He gobbles down his food so fast, and he comes whistling into the room where auntie is sitting, and I actually saw him with a toothpick in his mouth the other day. Gilbert Rogers is much more of a gentleman."

"That's where you are mistaken," retorted Archie, roused to a defence of his friend. "There never was

a truer-hearted gentleman than Jack Allen. I admit he sometimes does things that are not quite the correct thing, but the poor fellow has never had a home. His mother died when he was a baby, and he has no sisters: he *wants* to do just right, and he would be covered with confusion if he heard you criticise him. I think it's mean, too, Theo, when he admires you and is so devoted to auntie."

"Well, I must say I don't admire him, and I wish he could behave like a gentleman, if he is one," was Theo's reply; at which Archie waxed very indignant, and strode away with the cutting remark that a lady who could speak so of her guests wasn't beyond criticism herself.

Feeling the truth of this final fling of Archie's, Theo was a little more ready to give Jack credit for the generosity he so honestly showed, and she was quite gracious as, loaded with a basket of good things, the pair set forth for the Reeds' home, now at the other end of the town.

Jack was so eager to buy everything that could be of the least possible use that Theo had to exercise a restraining influence upon him; but the number and variety of purchases he did make caused the eyes of the small Reeds to open with wonder and delight. Tommy was made perfectly blissful by the gift of a new pair of skates; Almiry rejoiced in a new frock; Emmeline and Imogene each hugged a doll; Timothy and Marcellus, with their cheeks stuffed out with candy, vainly tried to grasp cakes, whips, tin horses, and marbles all at once; while Pearl stretched out her dirty

little hands for the rubber doll and bright ball Theo held out to her.

"A box of soap wouldn't have been a bad investment," remarked Jack, as he laughed over the baby's name.

"No," returned Theo, laughing in her turn; "but I'm afraid the only use Pearl would make of it would be to eat it: she puts everything in her mouth."

"Poor little beggars!" said Jack, as he walked along thoughtfully by Theo's side. "I'm afraid I'm rather selfish. I should never have thought of this but for you. I should like to do something more for them. Archie's friend Tommy, for example. Will you let me know if I can ever help him? He seems such a bright youngster."

"You are very good to think of him," answered Theo, her face aglow with sympathy. "I shall not forget, and if the time comes to do Master Tommy a good turn you shall be the first to hear of it."

"You ought to have a sister, Jack," she said, presently.

"I haven't," he replied, simply, with a little sigh. "I often envy Arch. There isn't a woman I know who takes any special interest in me, except my old nurse, maybe."

"Don't say that," expostulated Theo. "We all do; auntie does. We will give you a share in auntie. You don't know what a tower of strength and haven of refuge she is."

"Would she adopt me?" cried Jack, delightedly. "You don't know how I admire her. I think she is a brick."

"I am sure she will," replied Theo, reassuringly; and Jack felt as if this were a Christmas indeed for him.

"So you want to adopt me?" said Miss Janet, as Theo laughingly told her that Jack was in search of an aunt and thought she would just suit him.

Jack looked quite grave and serious as he said, "I don't deserve to claim as much as that, but I should like you to be my friend. It would make a big difference if I could have your friendship and interest. I have to be good now just for goodness' sake, and I don't always find it very satisfactory."

"My dear boy," was Miss Janet's response, as she held out both hands, "that you can be good simply for goodness' sake is a higher principle than any other you could possess, but if my friendship and sympathy and affection can mean anything to you, be sure you have it, and you must promise to come to me whenever you are troubled or unhappy, and I will give you whatever help I can, as I do my own children."

Jack's eyes were very grave and steady as he bent his head as deferentially as any courtier, and, folding Miss Janet's hands together, he reverently kissed them.

Archie was delighted when he heard of the compact, and looked triumphantly at Theo, who said never a word. It was one of Theo's little faults that she did not like to admit herself in the wrong. She had not learned to distinguish between obstinacy and firmness, and had yet to discover that to confess one's self mistaken requires some courage, and indicates a greater

strength of character than does that stubbornness so often the outgrowth of weakness and vanity.

But Archie felt Aunt Janet's opinion was not to be gainsaid, and that her endorsement of his friend settled the matter for everybody.

"That's just like Jack," he said, hearing of his munificence towards the Reeds. "I've seen him do such things a dozen times and no one else knew anything about it. I've known him to race around to get a poor man work. I've discovered him carrying clothes to some poor old woman. I've seen him pick up a little miserable baby child in the street and send it home with its hands full of goodies. Yes, that's just like Jack."

Theo sat with downcast eyes during this eulogy, but obstinately refused to give Archie, by word or look, any satisfaction as to her opinion upon the subject.

The other girls—as girls will—teased her about Jack's evident devotion, but she disdainfully turned the subject, scornfully disclaiming any interest in "boys."

Naughty little Val couldn't help being pleased by Gilbert's selection of herself as an object of attention, and gave "a side glance and looked down" with all the coquetry born in her.

Nannie was always the same straightforward, gracious girl, unaffectedly glad to please, and yet never seeking attention.

"I think it is a shame, Val, for you to do so," remonstrated Theo.

"Do how?" inquired Val, opening wide her blue eyes.

"Why, that way; a girl not fifteen till next March acting like a grown-up woman. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You don't see Nannie doing it."

Val made a little face, and, as might have been expected, redoubled her little wiles, and Theo turned her a cold shoulder, devoting herself so exclusively to Nannie that Val jealously began to wish Nannie had stayed away, for she loved Theo with all her wilful little heart; and, though she knew she was not behaving as became a discreet little maiden, she laid the fault all upon Theo's shoulders. "If she were not so righteous," thought Val, "I wouldn't do so; but I know she thinks I am doing it on purpose: so I shall just keep on."

But finally she thought better of it. A glance from Miss Janet's eye brought her to herself, and so she took her little trouble to auntie.

"Theo doesn't love me any more," she said, twisting the ribbons which hung from her belt.

"Why, Val!" protested auntie, "what a dreadful charge!"

"She doesn't," repeated Val: "she will hardly speak to me."

"What have you done to offend her?"

"I haven't done a thing, auntie. Am I acting silly?"

"How, silly?"

Val hung her head. "Theo says I am, because I talk to Gilbert."

"Because you *talk* to Gilbert?"

"Well, not just talk; look. She says I make eyes at him."

Auntie could but smile. "My dear little flibberty-

gibbet," she said, "I am afraid you are a trifle silly. I think it is very nice for a girl to have boy friends, if they are nice boys; and these boys are. So it is perfectly proper for you to talk to Gilbert; but I must say the 'making eyes' is hardly what I should suggest as an amusement. When you are old enough, my little girl, it will do very well for you to think of some good man as the one to bless you with his love, but you are only a little inexperienced school-girl, and till you have finished with school I think it would be much better for you to keep sentiment out of your friendships, and behave like a good sensible little body; every one will think much more of you if you do. Your auntie doesn't mean to frown on anything that is right and natural; she wants you to be just like other girls, but she wants you to choose from among those other girls the sensible, unaffected, womanly ones for your example, and not the romantic, superficial bodies whom you yourself cannot admire. Now go along, make peace with Theo, and stop making eyes."

So Val, with a distinct desire to "behave," acted so sensibly and decorously that Theo gave her to understand she quite approved of her; and, the one objectionable element eliminated, the little party frolicked through the holidays upon the best terms possible.

CHAPTER IX.

FUN AND NONSENSE.

ARCHIE was generally the ringleader in all the nonsense that was going, and one stormy evening proposed that they should write nonsense verses. "Anybody can rhyme cat and bat and hat, and such things; let us try which can do the best."

"I don't believe I could make a rhyme to save me," declared Nannie.

"Oh, you can if you only think so," reassured Archie. "It needn't have any sense: the less the better, indeed."

"I never wrote a line of verse in my life," expostulated Jack. "Give us something easy, Arch."

"You're foolish, boy," persisted Archie; "you can do it just as well as not. I'm not going to let you off."

So, taking paper and pencil, with knit brows and puzzled expressions they all worked away for a matter of fifteen or twenty minutes.

"What rhymes with rhyme?" called Jack, after a time, he having been contemplating the ceiling with an absorbed look for some minutes.

"Time!" "Dime!" "Clime!" came from different parts of the room.

"Thank you; that will do." And Jack returned to his paper.

"All ready?" questioned Archie, who had been scribbling away unceasingly. "I'll bet mine is the longest."

"And mine is the shortest!" exclaimed Nannie.

"Well, start in with it."

And Nannie read,—

"We are six
In a fix."

"Ho!" said Archie, "you're right; it didn't take you long to write that. You done well," as mammy says.—"Now, Val."

"No, one of you boys," suggested Val.

"We'll sandwich them."

"Jack, then."

"All right; here goes!" responded that person:

"You cannot tell how queer I feel
Whene'er I try to make a rhyme,
As if I were an Arctic seal
Brought southward in the summer-time."

"First-rate!" cried the audience, vigorously applauding.

"There's quite an element of poetry in that, Jack," declared Archie. "I say, old fellow, you builded better than you knew.—Now, Val, your turn." And she read,—

"The winter night is dark and cold,
We long for summer green;

Instead of furs and overcoats
We'd gladly greet *Nan*-keen.

"Though Christmas-time was made for fun,
And what mammy calls to 'projick,'
Some one I know brings me to task
With reasons *Theo*-logic.

"You all have heard of that Jim Crow
Who bore off in his black claw
The Ring of the Cardinal: no such thing
Could ever do our *Jack*-daw.

"'Twould be much more like some one else
To sneak it off and march 'way,
Then laugh to see them hunt and search,
While he watched in his *Arch*-way.

"Though in my song, you must confess,
You're caught against your will,
As oft a wary fish is hooked
Right through its little *Gill*,

"I beg my rhymes you will forgive,
And spare me malediction:
My final fling you'll find, my friends,
In this my *Val*-ediction."

"Pretty good," commented Archie, "though you are out in your metre sometimes. However, it is quite fetching for so young a person." And in Archie's eyes there lurked a mischievous gleam.

"I couldn't have made so many rhymes to save me," avowed Nannie; "and they are so original. I think it is as clever as can be, Val."

"So say we all of us," sang the others in a chorus. —"Now, Gilbert."

"Mine is not worth much," asserted Gilbert: "I don't believe I'd better read it."

"Nonsense, boy!" said Archie; "don't be such a modest violet: go on."

"Well," assented Gilbert, a little nettled by Archie's remark, "this is it:

"I climbed a hill;
I looked above;
I saw two stars
A-making love.
'How bright you are!'
Said one. 'I think
You are enough
To make one wink.'
I'd like to tell you,
If I knew,
What t'other one said,
But, 'tis true,
Before a word
I could define,
I heard a voice say,
'Shine, sir! shine!'"

"What's the matter with that?" observed Jack. "I think that's very subtle, myself."

"Now, Theo," called Archie. "No backing out."

Fearing lest she, too, be called a modest violet, Theo, through her blushes, read,—

"I have a little cat, O,
Who dearly loves tomato.
And the darling little dumpkin
Is also fond of pumpkin.
But I know he would like to beat
The boy who put shells on his feet."

"Good!" cried Jack; "that not only contains unique rhymes, but a wholesome moral lesson, which I hope will have its effect.—Now, Arch, old boy, we'll hear from you. Prepare yourselves, ladies and gentlemen; I see he has a long, long poem,—an epic, probably. Make yourselves comfortable: we know not what we may have to endure.—Fire ahead, Arch."

"This," announced Archie, clearing his throat,—"this is something which should long ago have been made the subject of verse. I have no doubt that many of you have often wondered what was the origin of the saying, 'the tune the old cow died of;' and in this simple little poem I have tried to embody the beautiful legend. I beg, ladies and gentlemen, that you will give it close attention.

"The old red cow stood by the fence,
Sing hey, the old rail fence!
Her cud she chewed in a sombre mood,
And she switched her tail by the old fence rail
In a manner you'd call 'immense.'

"A minstrel strayed the fields among,
Sing hey, the fields among!
And he swung his lute, and began to toot
Of an old red cow and an apple bough,
And this is the way of his song.

"'A purple-eyed cow,' the minstrel sang,
Sing hey, the cow he sang!
'Stood mooning beside an old hill-side,
Stood stupidly gazing, stood healthily grazing
Green herbs with a bitter tang.

"'"O long-horned cow, give me milk," I said,
Sing hey, the cow so red!
She unscrewed her horn, as sure as I'm born,
And gave me a drink with a knowing wink,
And one horn left on her head.

"'Then over she flung her deft left leg,
Sing hey, her deft left leg!
On an apple bough swung the reckless cow,
And chattered her teeth, while I stood beneath
And said, "Fly down, I beg."

"'Then crawled she down the rugged bark,
Sing hey, the rugged bark!
And began to sing a Highland fling,
While I played a tune, à la clair de lune,
Till daylight grew to dark.'

"So sang the man with the wondrous lute,
Sing hey, the wondrous lute!
And the red cow gazed at him amazed,
Till in sheer disgust she kicked the dust,
And changed the tone of her suit.

"Then off she went with her flying tail,
Sing hey, her flying tail!
She would get away from the minstrel's lay,
For her sorrowing heart could not stand the smart
Of the words of that minstrel male.

"The old cow reached the river's brim,
Sing ah! the river's brim!
But the song came still over dale and hill;
So in she rushed, while the water gushed
And shut out the minstrel's hymn.

"So this is the way the old cow died,
Sing woe! the cow she died!
And the minstrel bland over sea and land
Wanders content with his instrument
And sings away in his pride."

"What utter, utter nonsense!" cried Theo.

"Do you really think so?" exclaimed Archie, eagerly. "Really, Theo?"

"Of course it is."

"Then I have accomplished my purpose." And Archie leaned back with the air of a victor.

"Isn't he the silliest creature that ever was?" said Theo, turning to Gilbert. "I think he can be more kinds of a simpleton than any one I ever saw."

"You do not appreciate wit nor worth, Theo," retorted Archie.

"I just love to be silly," declared Val, clasping her hands. "I like to see how utterly silly I can be sometimes."

"I must say I do myself," acknowledged Jack.

"So does Theo," observed her aunt. "No one enjoys nonsense more; but she thinks Archie needs more dignity."

"He can be dignified enough when he wants to," remarked Val, with a remembrance of Archie's manner toward her some time back.

"We must go to bed early to-night," said Nannie, presently, "for to-morrow night is the party, you know."

The party was one to which all had been invited, and was given by one of the girls' school-mates. Although Miss Nelson did not care to have the girls accept every invitation given them, believing that school-girls should be protected from the result of late hours and too much excitement, during the holidays they were given greater latitude, and consequently

enjoyed those pleasures which then came to them with greater zest.

"Young people," Miss Nelson used to say to the girls, "have such a capacity for enjoyment that it seems a pity to crowd into their lives those pleasures which they can appreciate later in life, and, apart from the damage done to their brains and their health, it does not seem right to let them outgrow their enthusiasms so early by filling their lives too full of mere pleasure. I would have my girls grow up slowly, and make their spring-time last as long as possible."

So *the* party was an unwonted diversion. The girls, of course, were in a high state of excitement over the prospect, and discussed gowns and all the little details of their toilets with all the interest imaginable; while the boys, though pretending to be very indifferent, were secretly counting on the good time they expected to have.

"Yes, we must go to bed early," said Nannie. "Come, girls." And they whisked off, leaving the boys to their own devices.

"Just like girls," asserted Archie. "They will sit up and talk till midnight, you see. I suppose they have some gimcrack things to get ready for to-morrow night. I say, fellows, let's serenade them."

"How? What?" asked they.

"I'll show you how," replied Archie. And, marching them off, he arranged his programme.

While the boys were putting their heads together over this latest caper, the girls were absorbed in an interesting conversation over "the party."

"My face feels very rough," said Nannie, rubbing her cheeks before the mirror.

"Oh, yes, we must do something for our complexions," asserted Val, holding her knees as she sat on the floor by the stove; and as anything that involved preparation for the great event was a delightful matter, the girls resolved upon oatmeal plasters, which they had heard were a most desirable application.

"They can't hurt us, you know," said Nannie.

"No, they couldn't possibly," agreed Theo, whose lovely complexion did not need the aid of even so harmless an agency to make it fair and smooth; but, of course, it was not so much the importance of the result as the importance of doing something, though in the case of none of the three was it at all necessary.

"I'll go and get the oatmeal," proposed Theo. "I wonder if it has to be cooked."

"I should think so," replied Val. "Bring it up anyhow, Theo, and we can decide afterwards if it needs cooking; if it does, we can easily do it on your stove."

After much discussion of the subject, it was decided to cook it, and so a little saucepan of the meal was mixed and boiled over Theo's stove.

"We'll have to cool it a little," said Nannie. "We can put it out on the roof a minute." And, this being done, the next thing was to decide how it should be applied.

"Oh, just put it over our faces, and then put some old pieces of handkerchiefs over it," explained Val. "We'll cut eyes and nose and mouth in the handkerchiefs, and they will do beautifully. I'll run down and find some.

I know I have two or three that have outlived their usefulness." And Val ran down to her room, returning with the "holey" handkerchiefs.

After much trouble the plasters were adjusted.

"Oh, you look so funny, Val!" exclaimed Theo, for Val was the first to complete her arrangement. "Look, Nannie! Oh, Val, you are the funniest thing I ever saw!" And Theo went off into shrieks of laughter.

"Don't make me laugh," entreated Nannie: "it makes my oatmeal all fall off and dribble down my neck." And, turning her back, she gravely proceeded to readjust her face-covering.

But when this was done her appearance was no less ridiculous than Val's, and started that small individual off into as violent a fit of laughter as Theo's, to the detriment of her "beauty mask."

"Oh, Theo," she gasped, "she looks like Humpty-Dumpty! I never saw anything so funny."

"Look at yourself," retorted Nannie, now joining in the mirth, and the girls became almost hysterical over each other's appearance, for when Theo finally completed her plastering she was a fresh joke, and the girls became unable to look at each other at all from a real agony of mirth.

In the midst of all this there was heard just outside their door a tremendous crash of noise.

"What in the world!" cried the girls, for it seemed as if all the tomtoms, hurdy-gurdies, and blatant instruments in the world had been put to service, such a combination of discordant sounds as there was.

"It is the boys!" cried Val; "they are serenading us.

Do hear that dreadful buzzing! What can it be? Oh, if I only dared to look! but I can't with this on, and I don't want to take it off; I could never get it fixed so nicely again. Oh, I know!" And, jumping up from the floor where she had been sitting, Val threw on her wrapper and flung over her face and head a black lace scarf of Nannie's which happened to be lying on the bureau. Then she cautiously opened the door and peeped over the baluster, to see the boys disappearing down-stairs with a collection of such instruments as they could devise from kitchen utensils and other objects.

Archie carried a big tin boiler, which he had slung around his neck by passing a rope through the two handles; upon this he was beating with iron spoons, interjecting this noise with a shrill whistle which he had raked out from among his boyish possessions; Jack had his banjo, upon which he played an energetic tune, once in a while stopping to whirl around his head a watchman's rattle, also found among Archie's discarded belongings; Gilbert bore a tin horn and an old accordion, upon both of which he kept up a vigorous attack; so the racket was something surprising; and, as if their ingenuity must go further, they contrived moreover to startle their audience by introducing every now and then a noise like the report of an army of pistols,—this being caused by the explosion of paper bags, which the boys blew up and burst simultaneously.

That Miss Nelson stood it all with equanimity was a wonder, but she had not the heart to stop the boys'

evident enjoyment: so they marched up stairs and down till they were tired, and in a little while the house was quiet.

Then the girls, with their beplastered countenances, thought it was time to settle down for the night, and soon the three abnormal-looking heads, appearing as if they belonged to very well stuffed rag dolls, were quietly resting on their pillows.

But when the girls awakened the next morning, the oatmeal plasters had stuck fast to their faces.

"Just like glue!" exclaimed Val. "How can we ever get them off?"

"We shall have to soak them," said Nannie, "in warm water."

"But it cannot be done in a minute, and we shall be late to breakfast. I'll have to run down and tell auntie the reason. I wouldn't have the boys know for anything. I hope I shall not meet any of them." And Theo, with a caked and scabby countenance, ran swiftly to her aunt's room.

It was so unnecessary, and yet so funny, that Miss Nelson could not help laughing, but she agreed to delay the breakfast a little to give the girls an opportunity of soaking off the sticky particles, and, after exacting a promise from her not to tell the boys, Theo sped back to her room, glad to have escaped encounter.

They were three very ruddy countenances which appeared at the breakfast-table, but no harm was done, and the girls were satisfied.

"But we should not have cooked it," said Val, "and then it would have been all right."

CHAPTER X.

THE PARTY.

"Do see if my hair is all right," cried Theo. "Oh, Nannie, how lovely you look! Pink is *so* becoming to you. Isn't my dress too short? I am sure I have grown since I last wore it."

"I don't think so," replied Nannie, looking Theo over critically; "maybe just a wee bit, but not enough to be noticed."

"I should feel so uncomfortable if it were," returned Theo. "I wish auntie had let me wear my mull."

"Why wouldn't she?"

"She thought it was too thin, and was afraid I might take cold. Val had set her heart on wearing a thin dress, she has such pretty arms, and she actually cried because auntie said she must wear something thicker. Auntie is always so wise; I know she is right, but sometimes I wish she wouldn't be so exactly that way every time."

"I think that white wool dress that you have on is prettier than the other," declared Nannie; "it falls so softly and is so prettily made."

"I am glad you think so; but, oh, I do wish I were rich, and could wear all sorts of lovely things,—China crêpes and those delicious silky things. Can't you

imagine the beautiful, beautiful things you would have, Nannie?"

"Yes," replied Nannie; "but we thaven't them, you know, and we must make the best of what we have."

"Auntie says," Theo went on, carefully fastening her one ornament, a delicate little chain, around her white throat,—"auntie says there are often prettier gowns made of cheap materials than of rich ones, especially for girls, and she doesn't let me have silks at all."

"Neither does mamma care to have me wear them, except those little checks and such. Mamma says girls are so pretty in themselves that they don't need handsome clothes."

"Auntie doesn't say that exactly, but she says simplicity is the charm of youth, and it destroys all the harmony to deck girls up and load them down with jewelry. We shall see some very, very dressy girls tonight, I know. I don't mind what they say of me, but Val does, and I know she will sigh 'for the fleshpots of Egypt' when she sees Fly Crawford. There is Val now."

"Do tell me, girls, do I look all right?" asked this latter individual as she entered the room, fully attired for the occasion.

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed the others; "but what have you done to your hair?" for Val had arranged an elaborate coiffure which would have done credit to the most approved hair-dresser.

Val looked a little confused as she said, "I did it up

high; it looks so foolish to go to a party with one's hair hanging down one's back."

"Oh, take it down, Val!" besought Theo, whose own braids were simply looped up by a ribbon.

"No, I shall not. It is too late to do it all over: the boys are waiting. You are so tall it doesn't make you look babyish to wear your hair so; but a mite like me—— No, it doesn't make any difference what you say," Val persisted, as the girls both tried to win her consent to the old arrangement, "I am going to wear it so."

"But what will auntie say?"

"She won't see it," replied Val, running out of the room.

And, sure enough, by the time the other two girls had reached the foot of the stairs Val had started off with Gilbert.

This last individual was something of a dandy, and was the only one of the three boys who boasted the necessary equipment for evening dress. Archie said he could not afford it, and, besides, the other boys would not be likely to dress so. "It's all very well," he said, "when one lives in a big city and goes into society all the time. I am just as particular about the correct thing as you are, Gil, but I don't see any sense in bothering about such things yet awhile."

As for Jack, he declared he was too young; he hated evening dress anyhow; a fellow looked ridiculous diked off like that before he was twenty-one; he shouldn't rig himself up so till he had to.

To all of which remarks Gilbert gave little heed, and

walked off with Val serenely, feeling that he was redeeming the credit of the whole party.

But upon entering the room where the young people were assembling, Gilbert found himself unique from being the only one in such attire, for Roseville was a small place, and its society did not feel the necessity of following exactly the customs of larger towns: so Gilbert felt unpleasantly conspicuous the whole evening.

However, it was a very happy, merry party. Theo and Nannie, with nothing to mar their pleasure, gave themselves up to the enjoyment of the occasion. They danced and chatted, and were as bright and charming as possible. One cloud alone darkened Jack's sky. In his effort to be attentive to Theo he upset a saucer of ice-cream in her lap; but she was so sorry for him in his embarrassment that she treated the matter very lightly, and was kinder to him than she would have been otherwise, for she was always tender to those in trouble.

"Who is your friend?" inquired Archie, in a low voice, of Theo, who was sitting with Val.

"Why, it is only Val," answered Theo: "you know who it is, Archie."

"No," replied Archie, mischievously; "I did not recognize the head, and I could not see her face."

Val pretended not to hear, and was indignant enough when she heard Archie, a few minutes later, say something about "old Miss Le Moyne."

But it was Lee Crawford who put the finishing stroke and nearly spoiled Val's evening.

Fly had never quite forgiven Val's disaffection towards herself and her friends, and not only did she contrive that Val should miss a number of dances, but she spoke so spitefully in Val's hearing that the poor little girl was finally missing from the room, and Theo, who had taken in the situation, found Val disconsolately sitting in the dressing-room all alone.

"Why, Val!" she exclaimed, "what are you doing here? Don't you feel well?"

"No,—that is, I'm a little tired."

This was a strange admission from Val, who was always the last to weary of amusement.

"Well, lie down," suggested Theo.

"No," returned Val, dispiritedly; "I will just sit here. Don't wait, Theo: you will miss some of the fun."

Theo stood still a moment, regarding her thoughtfully. "What was it Lee Crawford was saying?" she presently asked.

The tears came into Val's eyes. "Oh, Theo," she answered, "did you hear?" She said, 'There is that stuck-up little Val Le Moyne; I wonder what she is doing here? Doesn't she look like a hair-dresser's sign, with all those puffs and twists? Did you ever see anything so unbecoming and ridiculous? She ought to be home in bed, anyhow,—a baby like her at a party! I suppose she feels very big with Mr. Swallowtail!' And then the girls all giggled, and she said,—oh, Theo, she said so every one could hear,—'She needn't look so righteous; we know she's no saint; don't we, girls? We could tell something that would take down her feathers.'"

"It was horrid," avowed Theo, indignantly. "Never mind, Val," soothingly; "just wait here a minute. I'll be back directly." And Theo, with ire flashing from her eyes, hurried back to her friends.

She found Jack standing in the door-way of the drawing-room. "Jack," she said, softly, "please find Archie for me, and bring him here." Jack flew to do her bidding, and presently the three were holding an indignation meeting.

"Now go get Gilbert," directed Theo, "and you boys try to make Val have the best sort of a time. Nannie and I have danced till we are tired; you have hardly danced with Val at all, Archie."

"I know," returned Archie, apologetically; "but she does look so unnatural with her hair all rigged up that way. I feel ashamed of her."

"Never mind," said Theo; "she's been punished enough for such a little thing as that. Don't be so mean, Archie. She was a little silly, but she is sorry now."

And so Val for the rest of the evening was always the centre of a little group. "Don't let any one know you care," Theo had whispered; "be as bright as you can." So Val, who was always bright enough with small effort, now making a great one, sparkled and shone like a little star, till even Archie wondered that he had never given her credit for such entertaining powers.

Val "'fessed" to auntie the next day, and felt better about it.

"You should have seen Fly Crawford, auntie!" said Theo: "she was dressed and bejewelled out of all rea-

son. Talk of signs! she looked like a cheap fashion-plate herself."

"And she needn't talk," continued Val: "she was anxious enough to dance with Gilbert. Jessie Meredith said——"

"Children! children!" interrupted auntie, raising her hand. "That is gossip; and gossip, my dears, is something your auntie does not care to hear."

"But it is true," Val persisted.

"Never mind," returned auntie: "there are a great many true things of which every one hesitates to speak. If you cannot speak well of a person, do not discuss that person at all, unless you are absolutely obliged to do so for some special reason,—to defend another or as a necessary warning. My dear girls, women, and men too, are often very ready to listen to evil, spiteful remarks, and I want my girls to help raise the standard of womanhood by repressing gossip. Do not listen to it, do not be the ones to further it, and your own little mustard-seed may some day become a great tree. It is not by lowering one's fellow-creatures that one elevates himself. If they are on a lower plane, try to raise them, and by the effort you must needs step up yourself. So, my little Val, don't try to excuse yourself by holding up Lee Crawford's wrong-doings. You know who says 'new actions are the only apologies and explanations of old ones which the noble can bear to offer or to receive.' Now, no more gossip, girlies."

After this, though Val honestly tried to be an unaffected little girl, any inclination towards young-lady-isms on her part was quickly suppressed by Archie's

calling her "old Miss Le Moyne," an appellation she greatly resented.

The holidays over, the boys returned to their studies, Nannie went back to school, and the other two girls were left to pick up the thread of their own school-work. But Val seemed listless and lacked her usual interest.

"You are not grieving over 'them hallycon days,' as Archie calls them, are you, Val?" asked Theo.

"No," replied Val: "I just feel tired and headachy."

"You have had too much excitement, I am afraid," remarked auntie, laying aside her work and placing a cool hand on Val's hot head. "You are feverish. I shall have to put you to bed, Val."

And to bed Val went, to stay there for a week.

She was not a very patient little body at the best of times, and poor Theo found herself in such constant demand that when Val was better, and was really quite able to wait Theo's convenience, it seemed to Miss Nelson that the younger girl was unreasonable; but Theo, with sweet patience, was always ready to hurry through her meals that she might sit with Val; was always willing to take her books to Val's room and study there; ready to jump at Val's slightest wish, to give up her own little pleasures since Val could not join them.

"She is making a perfect slave of the child. This will not do," said Miss Nelson to herself. "It is very hard for Theo to say 'no,' even when she knows it would be best. I must have a little talk with each of them."

So one day when Val was sitting in a big chair by

the window, fretting for Theo's return from school, Miss Nelson quietly said,—

"I'm afraid you don't love Theo very much, Val."

Val turned upon her eyes wide with surprise at such an accusation.

"Why, auntie," she protested, "you are joking. I love Theo dearly; you know I do."

"But aren't you a little selfish about it, dearie girl?"

"Why, what do you mean, auntie? I would give anything I possess to Theo."

"I know you are generous, dear; but there is a distinction, if not a difference, between generosity and unselfishness: it is one thing to give to a friend and another to give up to her. It seems to me if you really loved Theo you would be very anxious for her happiness all the time; you would not claim every moment of her spare time; you would not demand from her the sacrifice of her amusements that you might have her society. I do not mean that Theo does not like dearly to be with you, and to render you any service she can, for it is a great pleasure to her to do both; but because it is a pleasure you are making yourself dependent upon her, and making her give to you the time and strength she needs for her own development."

"But I don't always ask her to stay with me," said Val, tearfully.

"No, dear, I know you do not; but you accept the sacrifice without demur. I want my girls' characters to ripen all around. I do not want you to be like fruit fair on one side and gnarly on the other. I want

you to be strong and self-reliant; and it is because I love you so truly that I feel I must every now and then turn you around to the sun, that you may ripen evenly, and you will be happier, my darling."

Val sat looking out of the window very thoughtfully; then she turned around and said, smiling, though her eyes were still wet,—

"I am afraid I am a very contrary little apple, I have to be turned so often."

"Not oftener than some others," declared auntie, smiling back. "I hope you will be a very nice, sweet little apple when you are grown: you belong to a good variety, my dear."

And when, Theo having come in, Val said, "Don't hurry up from dinner, Theo; I am so much better, I can amuse myself," Miss Nelson's loving caress of the little dark head gave Val more pleasure than the sacrifice gave her pain.

"I am so glad Val is better," said Theo, enjoying the time she was taking over her dessert.

"Yes," Miss Nelson replied, "she will be quite herself again in a few days. Val is improving in more ways than one. Theo, you must not keep her back."

Theo looked up wonderingly: "I keep her back?"

"Yes, dear; it took me a long time to learn in just how great a measure we must give up to those we love. I think I was startled and shocked when I once discovered that I had been encouraging a weakness where I should have been giving strength. The line is such a very difficult one to draw that I hardly know how to tell you where to draw it. In Val's case she is a little

inclined to be selfish, and you, on the other hand, are never quite ready to say 'no' to one you love. So long as you are really and absolutely needed by Val, I should be very sorry to discourage you from lending her all the help she requires, but when she overdraws from you to the weakening of her own character, I think you must be careful, and that is where the difficulty comes, to know when to withhold. Still, dear, I tell you this because your inclination is in the opposite direction, and I do not believe you will ever be eager to withhold too much. Can you follow me?"

"I think I see what you mean," replied Theo. "It is like always carrying a child and never letting him learn to walk. But it is such a pleasure, auntie, to do for those we love."

"I know it, dear; it is one of our greatest privileges, and I should be very sorry to depreciate it. I only mean we must not be selfishly unselfish."

"What a funny expression!" said Theo. "But I know what you mean, auntie: we have no right to do a kind thing just because it pleases ourselves; we must consider whether it is to be really a help or a hinderance."

"Exactly," returned auntie, rising from the table. "We must not feed babies on too many sweetmeats even if they cry for them."

Theo nodded as she followed her aunt. "Then I will practise for the musicale," she said. "I wasn't going to, for I knew I should have to give a great deal of extra time to it, and I told Professor Rheinstein I could not possibly do it. He seemed very much dis-

appointed, and asked me to think over it a day or two. You know I have refused every time."

"Yes," answered auntie, "you see an example right at hand. If you can do Professor Rheinstein credit by playing well at the musicale, you are helping him in his reputation as a teacher; and to give that time to Val would only lessen her self-reliance and do you no good."

So, with a hasty run up to Val to explain matters, Theo devoted herself to her practising with great energy, and Val, being made to understand it was to further Professor Rheinstein's interests, was quite pleased that she had given a twist towards the sunny side.

Theo's best talent was for her music, and though she found it hard to overcome a certain shyness in playing before an audience, she was determined to conquer herself in this respect, for Miss Nelson tried to make her understand that it was only due her teacher that she should do her best.

"I think," Miss Nelson said, "that not every one appreciates the difficult position in which a teacher is placed. If a pupil is dull, it is because the teacher has failed to make her brilliant; but, on the other hand, if she is naturally quick, the poor teacher must retire to the background, and all credit be given to the intellect of the pupil. If every one could see the patient, unremitting toil given to the education of each child, the lessons analyzed and pondered over by tired, conscientious teachers who desire to give a clear understanding of what they teach to those who, perhaps, give

not more than five minutes to their study; if the world could hear the beratings for partiality, the accusations of stupidity, the charges of temper, of meanness, of harshness, given to those whose only aim is to make good students of those in their charge, I think we should all be more ready to lend our aid to the long-suffering teachers by standing shoulder to shoulder with them in their battle."

Theo retailed all this to her classmates at recess.

"Your aunt must have been a teacher herself," remarked one of the girls.

"Indeed she was not," returned Theo.

"Well, my mother doesn't talk that way," observed one of the girls, flippantly. "She says the teachers are paid to make me learn, and it is their business to see that I do."

"If we were machines they might," interposed Nannie Talcott; "they could oil us up once in a while and start us going, and we could turn out so much every day; but if we haven't sense enough to see the advantage to ourselves in study, I don't see how it is the teacher's fault if we turn out ignoramuses."

"It's all very well for you to talk, Nannie Talcott," said the girl who had spoken before; "it is no trouble for you. You are always ahead of all of us."

"Yes," sighed another, "it's easy for Nan."

"That is just where you are mistaken," declared Nannie. "I haven't a single brilliant quality, unless," she said, slowly, "you choose to call perseverance one. I have that, I believe, and I try to have concentration."

"I haven't," said one; "not a bit."

"Then get some," advised Nannie. "It is high time you did. If you know what is lacking, you ought to be ready to supply the lack. Jessie Meredith, you are as bright as anybody, and I think it is a shame to let yourself go, day after day, when you know you could do splendidly if you just stuck to it. I'll tell you what let us do, girls," continued Nannie, struck with a sudden thought, "let us each keep an account for a month of how many hours we study,—really study, not sit with books before us,—and I'll venture to say it is the girl who studies the hardest who stands the highest. There!"

To this proposal several of the girls agreed, and as the accounts showed, with one exception, it was as Nannie had said.

CHAPTER XI.

VALENTINES.

THEO was inwardly very nervous over the musicale, and dreaded it more than any one knew. She was to play an *étude* of Jensen's, and it took all her powers "to get it well into her fingers," as she expressed it. She declared, to Val only, that she knew she should break down.

"How silly! You will do beautifully," predicted Val, who by this time was quite well again. "Just think you are going to play it all right, and you will. Don't think of the people; just think of the piano."

Which was very good advice; but Theo was not to be so readily convinced, and declared she knew she should make an ignominious failure.

"I believe I'll cut my finger, or do something," she said, in desperation, as the hour approached. "I wish I hadn't said I would play."

"Now, don't you ever call me silly again," scolded Val. "I never was as silly as this." So by dint of coaxing and scolding together Theo finally was made ashamed of her lack of courage, and when Val called her a coward she summoned all her pride and determined not to fail.

"If I see you falter," Val had threatened, "I am

going to wave a white feather, and you will know what I mean."

"So will every one else," complained Theo.

"I hope they will." And, true to her word, Val actually carried a white feather in her pocket.

There was a great rustle of skirts and the sound of little breezy whispers as the girls took their places in the audience-hall of Mrs. McCleary's school. Val determinedly placed herself in a front seat, with her eye fixed uncompromisingly on poor Theo, who trembled and shook as she sat among the performers.

"She'll do it,—I know she'll do it," thought Theo. And she grasped her roll of music tighter. To be made the object of ridicule struck terror to her soul. She was brave enough in other matters where she could forget herself, but this shyness was due to what she felt was her conspicuous position.

Professor Rheinstein bustled about and gave Theo a reassuring nod.

"Oh, dear me," thought she, "what shall I think about to keep me from thinking of myself? That dreadful Val looks so determined." And she glanced towards the front row of seats. Val made a little movement towards her pocket, as if to say, "Break down if you dare!" And Theo had to smile at the despotic expression on Val's face.

"You haf not fear," whispered Professor Rheinstein, as Theo's turn came; but, though she felt her knees beginning to shake and her hands to get cold, she only smiled and shook her head, feeling like a martyr going to the stake.

Another look towards Val and the same little movement from Val towards her pocket, and then Theo began, tremulously enough at first, but gaining courage as she proceeded. Only once she felt the notes slipping away from her, and she gave a startled glance towards Val, who slyly slipped her hand into her pocket, and Theo saw the awful tip of a white feather appearing. She felt the blood rushing to her face, and thought the next moment she should either laugh or cry, but she summoned all her resolution, and the critical moment passed, though it is a wonder the effect produced by Val's strategy was not enough to make Theo lose all control; but she went on without further hesitation; and Val led the applause which followed with such a clapping of hands that it is a wonder she did not blister them.

Professor Rheinstein beamed most approvingly, and said, as Theo returned to her place, "Fery goot! you haf done yourseluf crate gredit."

The crisis over, Theo felt how absurd it all was, and religiously kept her eyes turned away from Val, for the wickedly mirthful expression around Val's mouth was too much for her.

At last the final number on the programme was given, and the buzzing of girlish voices congratulating, expostulating, and relating was heard all over the room.

"Oh, Theo! you did so beautifully," from Nannie Talcott, and, "Oh, Theo! you play like an angel," from Jessie Meredith, and, "Oh, you precious darling old goose! I knew you would come out all right," in a whisper from Val.

"Yes," whispered back Theo, "you wretched little sinner, I've a mind to box your ears for you."

Val laughed in high glee: "Never mind, I was the power behind the throne that time; deny it if you dare, miss!"

"Perhaps you were," acknowledged Theo. "Anyhow, I am glad it is all over."

"Professor Rheinstein is very much pleased with you," was auntie's greeting, as she stood waiting at the school door for the two girls, who were lingering somewhat behind.

"I am very glad," was Theo's response. And catching Val's eye she laughed, and then told Miss Janet of Val's ingenious device for keeping her courage up to the sticking-point.

Miss Janet joined in the laugh, and said it was quite a wily stratagem for so small a head to devise. "But it was just like Val," she declared.

Val felt that she had a good joke on Theo, whose superiority of behavior she had always been obliged to admit; and Theo, in her turn, longed for an opportunity of "taking Miss Val down," as she termed it.

The opportunity was not long in coming; for on the morning of the fourteenth of February, as the mail was handed in while they were all at breakfast, among the letters was one for Val, which she opened a little curiously, and in a few moments her face turned scarlet, and she slipped the envelope into her pocket.

Miss Nelson, who was occupied with her own mail, did not notice Val's confusion, but it did not escape

Theo, who, putting this and that together, resolved to take her revenge on Val.

During the morning she said not a word to Val on the subject, but turned the conversation in other directions, though she could see that Val longed to give her confidence. But at dinner-time she looked up, as if the idea had just occurred to her, and mischievously said, "Auntie, I believe Val has a valentine. Ask her to show it to you."

Again the color surged up into Val's face as Miss Nelson looked up inquiringly. It was so evident that there was some truth in Theo's random shot, that Val succumbed at once, and silently handed the envelope and its contents to Miss Nelson.

"We will all have a look at it after dinner," said Miss Nelson, kindly, "and I will show you some old valentines," seeing that Val's confusion was genuine, and that Theo was rather enjoying it.

"You would rather I should see it, dear?" inquiringly came from auntie, as she joined the girls in the sitting-room and placed an old-fashioned box on the table.

"Oh, yes," uttered Val, in an earnest tone. "So much rather. I didn't expect it, auntie, indeed I did not."

"Why, who does expect a valentine?" smilingly questioned Miss Janet. "Now we will look at yours first, and then I will show you some I have in this box. I am sure they will interest you both." Then, sitting down, Miss Janet drew the valentine from its enclosure and read it aloud, while Val sat with eyes

cast down and the color coming and going in her face:

"If I could paint my love for thee,
Or pour it forth in melody,
In picture and in song of mine
I'd give thee praise, sweet Valentine.

"If tender buds could speak for me
And murmur my name lovingly,
A fragrant wreath for thee I'd twine
That thou mightst wear, sweet Valentine.

"Gems fit to make a princess' dower,
The brightest raindrops in a shower,
I fain would send, couldst thou divine
From them my love, sweet Valentine.

"If birds that sing among the trees,
Or if some gentle little breeze,
Could find their way to heart of thine,
They'd whisper, 'Be my Valentine.'"

"Why, Gilbert has quite a gift for verse-making!" declared Miss Nelson, as she concluded; "but he ought to have chosen a more mature valentine than this little one," she continued.

"How did you know it was Gilbert?" And Val put the question with such evident wonder at auntie's perspicacity that Miss Nelson had to laugh.

"Did you suppose I should not know? It is quite a nice little valentine. I should put it away, and some day you will be quite amused by it. Your name, you know, was a great temptation: no doubt it was too much for Gilbert to withstand."

Val was quite taken aback by auntie's way of looking at the matter, and felt ashamed to attach any senti-

ment to it; and after her aunt's explanation Theo, too, felt that she had considered it rather more important than was necessary, and they fell to examining the contents of the old box, which soon became much more interesting than any modern valentine could be, for Miss Nelson had kept, as great treasures, a number of family valentines.

There was one from her grandfather to her grandmother, several of her mother's, and a number of her own and her sister's.

"Think, Val, our great-grandmother!" exclaimed Theo, as she curiously and carefully opened a yellow sheet.

"Oh, yes; let me see," returned Val, "where do we meet on the family tree? My mother and your father were first-cousins, so—oh, dear, I do get so mixed up!—and your father was my second-cousin. No—oh, how is it? Do tell us, auntie."

"My father was your mother's uncle," explained Miss Janet, "and my grandfather was her grandfather also; so your great-grandparents and Theo's are the same."

"Then this valentine belonged to *our* great-grandmother, Theo. Isn't it queer, and so old, old-fashioned?"

"And, oh, what a nice one this is! all silver filigree, and such exquisite writing. Tell us, whose was this?" said Theo.

"My father sent it to my mother." And Miss Nelson read the date.

"Then these are my father's to my mother?" And

Theo untied a little packet fresher than the rest. "See these roses, Val. Aren't they nicely painted? I wonder who did them."

"I can tell you. They were painted by Val's father; he was here at the time," replied Miss Nelson.

This gave an added interest, and in the delight and entertainment these relics of the past afforded Gilbert's valentine sank into insignificance and was scarcely referred to again.

Only on the occasion of Gilbert's next visit Miss Nelson brought a blush to the young man's cheek by saying, in the presence of them all, "We quite enjoyed your valentine, Gilbert. I did not know you were so clever; we shall know upon whom to call when we want anything of the kind."

And somehow Gilbert felt rather flat, especially as Archie looked at him across the room with such a meaning glance that Gilbert felt he must offer some explanation, which he did rather clumsily, by saying, "Val's name afforded such a good opportunity." Thus he not only endorsed Miss Nelson's conception of the matter, but robbed it of any element of sentiment Val might still have been inclined to think it possessed.

Not only was Gilbert's valentine eclipsed by the fascinating old ones, but it was quite outdone in interest by two others which arrived that same evening.

A violent ring and a thundering knock were heard at the front door, and a few minutes after Eldorado Ann came giggling in, bringing two mysterious-looking missives. One proved to be for Theo, the other for Val. Upon being opened, Theo's displayed a single

white feather fastened on a black card. "Oh, Val, you told!" exclaimed Theo, reproachfully. And Val, laughing, opened her envelope, which was addressed to "Old Miss Le Moyne." Inside was a cut from a fashion-sheet, representing the back view of a very much befrizzed and bepuffed head, evidently a new style of coiffure; under it was written, "The very latest thing for Valentines."

"They are from Archie!" cried both girls at once. And, catching a quizzical look on Miss Janet's face, they exclaimed, "You know something about it, auntie; you know you do;" but auntie refused to say yea or nay, and the girls decided they would put their heads together and send offsets to Archie. The old joke was never too old to use, and the next day, with Nannie Talcott's help, a valentine was prepared. On a card was painted a stiff and stark hen lying helplessly on its back; above was written, "One more unfortunate," and underneath, "Who killed Henny-Penny?"

"That is rather running things into the ground," said Theo; "but Archie hates to be teased about that affair more than any other. Now we must think of something else. Oh, no! I'll tell you what we will do. We will wait till the first of April, and then we can play a joke on him; if he is at home we can do it here, and if not, we can send him a box."

Short days and hard study brought February to an end, and March came blowing in, bringing Val's fifteenth birthday.

"I am always in a skurry," said Val; "no wonder March brought me."

"Yes, you are a breezy sort of an individual," pronounced Miss Janet, looking at the dancing eyes and bright face.

"I am as old as you are, Miss Theo," exulted Val: "we are both fifteen."

"I shall not be sixteen till June, to be sure," acknowledged Theo, "but I am ever so much bigger, miss." And she drew herself up to her full height, which was several inches beyond Val's. "You're nothing but a dot," she went on.

Val's tininess was her sore point, for she would very much have liked to be taller, and when auntie forbade high heels Val thought it a great deprivation, for she could, through them, have added a little to her stature. "Anyhow," she said, after a dignified silence following Theo's fling at her size, "I have this advantage,—no one expects so much of me."

Theo laughed teasingly: "They wouldn't if you didn't try to impress everybody with your grown-upness."

"Now, Theo," expostulated Val, in a hurt voice, "I don't do that near as much as I did. Do I, auntie?"

"You are improving," replied auntie, taking part in Theo's raillery: "by the time you are as old as I am you will be quite like a little girl."

"Now, auntie, you are all too provoking, and on my birthday, too! I think it is real mean." And Val looked almost ready to cry.

"Never mind, dear little baby," said Theo, coaxingly: "no one would imagine for an instant that you

were a grown person to see you now. There, I won't tease you any more," as Val's eyes actually began to fill. "Mammy has made a perfectly delicious chocolate-cake, and we are to have oysters for supper, and you are a precious little love."

So Val cheered up; and, though she really felt quite grown-up in her "sixteenth year," as she proudly said, she tried to behave with "becoming simplicity," and was quite as childishly pleased over her birthday-cake as any one could desire.

In most directions she was really much more of a child than Theo, a fact which made her little attempted airs more noticeable.

She and Archie had returned to their old good-comradeship, and enjoyed each other's jokes as did no others. Though unlike in many respects, there was just enough similarity in their natures to make them very congenial, and the cross-flashes of wit which went on when they two were, as Theo termed it, "on a high horse," gave abundant amusement to Theo and Miss Janet.

March led them along towards the first of April, and the last day of the month brought Archie home.

It was the next morning at breakfast that the girls began their system of jokes, when Archie's salt-cellar was filled with sugar, with which he liberally sprinkled his steak. He said nothing, however, not wanting to give the girls the satisfaction of seeing he noticed it; but when, upon taking a drink of water, he found it as salt as brine, he put down his glass, saying, vehemently, "I'll get even with you."

To put Archie into even the semblance of a rage

was a great victory, and the girls laughed in the most tantalizing manner at his outburst of wrath, and, as his meals at home were usually highly enjoyed, they could have taken no surer way of annoying him. He refused many dishes offered him which were in reality perfectly good, for the girls themselves made a pretence of refusing them just to make him do the same, and so they succeeded beyond their hopes. Though Archie threatened vengeance, they were constantly on their guard, and Archie found no opportunity of "paying them back," while they plotted and planned further mischief against him.

The first plate of crullers suited Archie's palate exactly when they were passed him at supper; he was extremely fond of them, and the girls knew he would call for a second supply, which Eldorado Ann brought in and set before him. He unsuspectingly helped himself, and when he bit into a mass of raw cotton, cunningly concealed by the brown batter, he vainly tried to get a satisfactory bite; and then the girls laughed in the most unrestrained manner at their clever joke.

"How rude you are!" exclaimed Archie.—"Auntie, mammy must be getting old; her crullers are a little tough.—Girls, why this unseemly mirth? It is not kind of you to make fun of poor old mammy's cooking; you know she is not as young as she was, and she has evidently left something out which should have been in these crullers, or else she has mistaken some ingredient which she should not have used for some other which she should have put in; but her sight is not what it has been. She is not in love, at her age,

surely; and so it must be the fault of her failing faculties. Now, in the 'hallycon' days of her youth, when she was in the united state——"

"She is in the United States now, Archie," interrupted Val: "what are you talking about? Virginia is one of the United States, isn't it?"

"Surely, my good girl, surely; but you mistake me. I did not say the United *States.* I said the united *state.* She is a widow, I believe, and is not now in the united state——"

"You remind me of one of those absurd creatures in 'Alice in Wonderland,' Archie," said Theo,—"the Hatter, or the Dormouse, or some of those things. You talk just as they did. You are worse than a nightmare."

But Archie, having led the subject away from the crullers, was satisfied, and, as he had then accomplished his purpose, ceased to criticise mammy, and simply shook his head, saying, "You are very obtuse, children: I will not argue with you any longer."

CHAPTER XII.

MISFORTUNE.

For some time both Theo and Val had noticed at times that Miss Janet seemed worried, for, though she was as interested as ever in the every-day doings of the little family, and laughed as heartily at their small jokes, always ready to appreciate any bright remark or witticism, she would sometimes seem so preoccupied and absorbed that Theo, who was more observing than Val, felt that there must be something more than usual amiss, and she unburdened her fears to Archie upon the occasion of his next visit home.

"Do you know, Archie," she said, "I am afraid something serious is worrying auntie, and I don't think we ought to let her worry alone."

"Of course not," agreed Archie. "What do you suppose it is that is wrong?"

"I think it must be some matter of business, or she would have told us."

"She isn't ill?"

"No; she has had letters which seem to have given her trouble, and I have seen her puzzling over her accounts oftener than she used."

"I shall ask her," resolutely declared Archie.

They were sitting in Theo's room, where the light

spring breeze was blowing the curtains back and forth. Outside, the robins and bluebirds were singing in the blossoming trees.

"How I do love my darling room!" said Theo, after a moment's silence. "I never could bear to give it up."

"What makes you talk that way?" demanded Archie, with a boy's impatience of unpleasant subjects. "You will never have to do it."

"I might have to," declared Theo, thoughtfully. "We might even have to give up the place. Such things do happen."

"Nonsense! 'don't cross your bridges till you come to them.' There may be nothing very much the matter, after all; only some little puzzle about the right investments, or something. Don't croak, Theo."

"I'm not croaking; and I should not have said anything to you about it, only I thought somebody ought to share auntie's troubles."

"Pshaw! Do you suppose it is *that?* My goodness! I'd work my fingers to the bone for her,—you know I would; but I don't think we ought to borrow trouble. If it comes, I hope I'm man enough to face it." And Archie squared his shoulders with a determined look on his face, as if he would defy the universe.

"Of course you would," answered Theo, lovingly. "Oh, Archie, I believe you are a comfort."

Archie laughed. "Well, don't bother," he returned. "I'll see all about it, and relieve your mind at the first opportunity. Jack is coming up this afternoon," he added, presently, "and we mustn't be gloomy."

"I don't see why we shouldn't be gloomy if we want to," replied Theo, instantly becoming frigid.

"It wouldn't be polite, for one thing," explained Archie, coolly; "and then it would be showing precious little pride to parade our troubles,—that is, supposing we have any. I don't believe in going about posing for sympathy."

"Nor I. I didn't mean that; I only meant I didn't see why Jack should have anything to do with our feelings."

"You're pretty mean to Jack." And Archie, having given utterance to this opinion, arose from the window-seat.

"Don't go," pleaded Theo, penitently; "we so seldom have a cosy talk these days. I'll be very nice to Jack, if you want me to be."

"I don't want you to be unless you really appreciate him," bluntly declared Archie. "I think you might give him credit for being as good a fellow as he is, especially when you know what chums we are."

"I do appreciate him," avowed Theo, in all sincerity; "but I believe I should like him better," she continued, hesitatingly, "if he—if he didn't value my opinion so much."

"I should think you'd feel complimented. I should. You're a first-rate girl, Theo, but you do find it awfully hard to give up."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Theo, meekly.

"Just treat Jack less top-loftily, and accept the things he does for you less condescendingly. One would think you were an empress, at least, to see the way you treat

him; and it isn't like you. Be just nice,—the same as you are to every one else."

"I'll try," promised Theo, humbly. "We will all go off into the woods this afternoon, and I'll be as good as gold."

"There's Jack's whistle now," cried Archie. "Come, let us go meet him; and I'll promise you, Theo, I'll talk to auntie very soon."

"Hello, Jack!" "Hello, Arch!" came from the two boys as Theo and Archie stood on the porch to greet Jack. "I'm glad to see you," was Theo's greeting as she put out her hand.

Jack never made his appearance without bringing a box of candy to the girls, some fruit or a book to Miss Nelson, and frequently something to mammy and Eldorado Ann, both of whom showed their appreciation by unstinted praise.

"He de mos' free-handedes' young man," mammy declared, dilating upon the subject to the girls. "Dey is a diff'unce, honeys, 'twix' free-handed pussons an' dese yer 'stravagant ones. Yo pa," turning to Theo, "was de free-handed kin', an' Mars' Arch he jes' de' same; but dere was Mars' John Nelson, he were t'other kin'. I always know when Mars' John were bo'n dat dey were a bump missin' in he haid, an' I always says to my ole man, Mars' John sholy will want dat bump some day. An' sho' 'nuff, honey, as I live an' breave, de day done come; Mars' John die in dis indenticus house 'thout nary other roof to cover he po' haid. He done los' ev'ythin'. Mars' Jack he de free-handed kin' too. I kin see dat; don't you go mistakin' it. Mars'

Jack mebbe ain't so high-steppin' as some, but he a bo'n gent'man. You cyarnt fool ole mammy."

So Jack's coming was always gladly hailed by two members of the household, at least. To Miss Nelson he brought all his confidences, and she, in her turn, told him as gently as a mother of his little failings, and he took her advice in such good part that every one but Theo acknowledged his improvement of manner.

Archie and Jack, with the two girls, started for the woods bent upon gathering wild flowers for Miss Nelson, who pleaded letters as an excuse for not going with them.

"I hate not to have auntie go," said Theo. "Don't you remember, Archie, how she used to take long walks with us when we were little things, and how interesting she used to make the walks? There was never a tree nor a flower, a spider's web nor a butterfly, that she did not find something in it of which to make a perfectly delightful story. I can remember how, one day, we watched a little ant carrying home a heavy load; we became so absorbed and interested that we would not go farther till we had seen the burden safely housed. How far the little creature travelled! I have never forgotten the place: it was just beyond here."

"Show it to me," said Jack.

"I will," acquiesced Theo. "You don't know how dear all such little things make these woods to us. There,—this is where the ant started, and all along this road he travelled; then he turned off here,—by that time he was getting tired. How he tugged and pulled his load up these rough places! Once in a while he

would have to rest, then he would start off again; and, what was funny, as he drew nearer home he would frequently meet friends, evidently, for they would stop and seem to carry on a conversation. During the first part of his trip he would not stop if he met an ant, but I suppose his acquaintances were in his own neighborhood, naturally."

"That is all very interesting," commented Jack. "Tell me some more."

"Oh, the birds," Theo went on, "and the squirrels are very funny, too; they do such human things. Do you read Thoreau at all?"

Jack confessed he did not.

"Oh, do, then," continued Theo, "if you like such things. You don't know how fascinating it is to read about all the things he was so absorbed in. Auntie used to read little bits to us, and now we love to read for ourselves."

Jack made a mental note, and resolved to read Thoreau forthwith.

"I think your auntie is the most wonderful woman I ever saw," he said; "but, then, you are all wonderful," he continued. "I feel so happy when I am here, as if I were in my proper element. I never did feel very happy before. I never knew just why. My stars! but it was a lucky day when I met Arch; we took to each other at once, you know."

"Tell me how you lived before," said Theo, remembering her promise to be "nice" to Jack.

"There isn't very much to tell. I was a little shaver when my mother died; I don't even remember her;

and I had nurses and governesses till I was big enough to go away to school. Then I was at boarding-school till I was ready for college."

"And your father?" interrogated Theo.

"My father died three years ago. I never saw very much of him, for he was always closely absorbed in business and hadn't much time to waste on a little chap like me."

"Are you like him?"

"No: they say I am most like my mother," returned Jack. "This is a picture of my mother." And Jack opened his watch, in the back of which a small photograph was inserted.

Theo looked at it earnestly. "You are like her," she remarked, handing it back to Jack.

"There was one school where I was for three years," Jack went on, after a pause. "I think I owe all the good there is in me to that school. The principal was a man every boy was obliged to respect, and he won their affections, too; that is, if they were impressionable at all. I am very grateful to him."

Theo felt a thrill of pity spring up for this lonely boy, whose story of his unfriended life was so simply told,—never a home, always boarding-schools. "Where did you spend your holidays?" she asked.

"Oh, at the school where I happened to be. I was in one school the year round till I went to another. My father used to come to see me once or twice a year, though my uncle never did. My uncle is my guardian, you know. I always had plenty of spending-money; but money can't buy everything."

"Poor Jack!" thought Theo, as she pondered over the starved life. "Well," she said, "you know you have auntie now. Come, let us see what Val and Archie are doing."

Val and Archie were waiting on the edge of a field, just beyond the woods: they were sitting on the top rail of a fence, and were seemingly having a very good time.

"What are you two doing?" called Theo, coming up to them.

"Enjoying the beauties of nature," replied Archie.

"Look at that sunset." And Val waved her hand towards a gorgeous western sky. "Isn't it splendid?"

"Perfectly magnificent," returned Theo.—"Come, Jack, we'll take a rail, too, and not let this pair monopolize all the sights.—Oh, Val, you don't know how lovely it is here in summer. Archie and I go out fishing, and spend whole days in the woods rummaging around to see what is to be seen. Sometimes auntie and I come here alone, and one reads while the other works, but on hot days we don't. In the morning we often take our work out to the summer-house,—you know the old summer-house with the clematis over it,—and sometimes we have our tea out there. I used to play there with my dolls when I was a little girl.—Do you know," and she laughingly turned to Jack, "I played with dolls till I was fourteen! and I love them yet," she confessed.—"Oh, Val, if you had only been here all along, what fun we could have had!"

"I think we have fun now," reponded Val. "I think this is fun."

"Everything is fun when the spring is so beautiful and the world so lovely. Look at those apple-trees, and hear those robins."

"All very lovely," pronounced Archie; "but it is growing damp, and I think we would best journey towards home. I am as hungry as a hunter, and mammy is a cook after my own heart."

"Except in the matter of crullers," suggested Val, slyly.

Archie gave her a little shake, and began to dilate upon the lingering beauties of the sunset.

After supper Archie sought his aunt, while the other three gathered around the piano. Jack insisted upon Theo's playing the music she had struggled through so bravely at the musicale, for he had heard the story of the white feather, and they had all laughed over it. She played willingly enough, and then followed it by some little bits of Grieg.

"I am glad you like Grieg," said Jack; "I brought along a song of his to try, if you will play the accompaniment. I can only manage a few chords on my banjo, and I am so fond of the song that I should like to try it with the piano."

Theo consented, and Jack was singing with all his heart "Ich liebe dich" when Archie returned to the room.

Theo saw in an instant that Archie's talk with Miss Nelson had realized her fears, and as soon as she could make an excuse she left Val with Jack and signified to her brother to follow her from the room.

"Oh, Archie!" she exclaimed, "what is it?"

"Nothing so dreadful," he rejoined, forcing a laugh. "I shall have to leave college, that is all. We shall not have to give up our home, Theo; that is one comfort."

"Leave college! Oh, Archie, you must not,—you cannot!"

"I must, and can," he replied, firmly.

"Tell me."

"Well, it is only that our investments have shrunk so much that, even with what Val's board brings, we have only about half what we used."

"How shrunk?"

"Why—I don't know whether you will understand, but you know there were loans on mortgages and things, and those have been called in, and new investments have had to be made, upon which a lower rate of interest is paid. Then some of the mortgages are foreclosed, and we have had to buy in the property, which lies idle on our hands. Again, there are some stocks—railroad stocks—that are not paying anything. Of course it isn't all actual loss, but it cramps us very much, and means stricter economy, for the present at least."

"Couldn't something be sold?"

"Not without great loss. Of course, Theo, I am not such a molly-coddle as to let a woman bother over me. I shall go to work."

"Oh, Archie, we can do something! I'll give up anything."

"There isn't anything to give up. Auntie does live very simply as it is, and it is not a question of house-

hold expenses; the little chopping off here and there wouldn't count. No, indeed; my college expenses, Theo, must be the first to be curtailed."

"Oh, Archie!" ejaculated poor Theo again, "if I could only help, I would do anything. Does auntie feel very unhappy about it?"

Archie did not speak for a minute; he was more disturbed than he cared that any one should discover; and, although auntie had been very courageous, the thought of Archie's sacrifice was very bitter to her, and Archie's arguments, though they had finally won his case, left him a very sorry victor, brave as was his outward showing. He was intensely interested in his college work, and to fall out of the ranks before he was midway was a severe trial to him.

Both brother and sister were silent for a little while. The lights were turned low, the sitting-room window was open, and all sorts of sweet odors were floating in, borne on the wings of the May night. From the room below came the tink-a-tank of Jack's banjo, and presently the song "Ich liebe dich" was repeated in all the fulness and sweetness of Jack's sympathetic voice, with an occasional chord from the banjo in accompaniment. Theo felt the tears come into her eyes, and she leaned over, resting her head on her brother's shoulder. Archie put his arm around her, and in this tender mood they sat listening while Jack finished his song.

As the last note died away, Theo gave a long sigh, and then said, "You are not going to stop just yet, are you, Archie?"

"No," was his reply; "I shall have to look about a little, and I want to take my exams., anyhow." And Archie, too, gave a long sigh.

Theo's arm stole around his neck in loving sympathy. "Never mind, you precious boy," she whispered; "you know what auntie says, that sometimes the way to a place seems a very rough one, but when we have gone over it we look back and see that by no other path could we have reached our destination. So, who knows but what the end may be the very fulfilment of all your hopes only to be reached in this way?"

For reply, Archie laid his cheek against Theo's bright hair and drew the little comforter closer to him.

Presently Val's voice called, "Theo! Archie! where are you?" And Theo, giving Archie one hug, jumped up and ran down to join the others, followed by Archie.

"We wondered what had become of you," was Val's remark; but Jack, looking for a moment very steadily at the two, said nothing, though after a while he proposed to Archie that they should go out for a walk.

"It is such a lovely night, Arch," he said, "I don't feel like turning in yet. Suppose we give ourselves a little stretch out-of-doors."

"Let us go this way," Archie suggested. Turning away from the town and leaving the village behind them, they walked toward the sweet-smelling orchards of the farms beyond. Presently Jack threw his arm across Archie's shoulder. "Tell us about it, old fellow," he said; "what is wrong?"

"What makes you think anything is wrong?" returned Archie, parrying the question, for he felt too sore and hurt to reveal his trouble.

"Do you think, old man," questioned Jack in his turn, "that anything could be wrong with any of you without my feeling it too? It did not need your cloudy countenance, for I saw the same shadow on Theo's face."

"I might as well make a clean breast of it," thought Archie: "Jack will have to know it some time." So he unburdened his heart, and Jack listened with the utmost interest, putting in a query once in a while.

After Archie had given his statement of affairs, Jack strode along very thoughtfully for a few minutes. "It's pretty tough, old man," he said, finally, "but you are right; and it isn't always the college men that get to the top of the heap. I've seen lots of them slump after they were through their studies, not amounting to a row of pins. I think," he added, meditatively, "that perhaps I see a way of giving you a lift." Then, suddenly, "I say, Arch, you wouldn't let me see you through, would you? I have twice as much as I need, and——"

But a movement of Archie's arm repulsed Jack in his eager offer.

"I might have known you wouldn't," continued Jack; "but you know how awfully glad I'd be to do it, Arch."

"I know," responded Archie. "You mean all right, Jack, and I appreciate it; but it's the necessity that hurts, not your offer."

"I see," Jack returned. "I think I see another way," he added, quietly. "You'll let me do that."

"What?" Archie questioned.

"Why, I think I know of a berth you can have,—maybe you won't care for it,—but never mind, I'll tell you later when I have found out about it."

After the boys had started out on their walk, Theo went to her auntie for a moment, but auntie's face showed too plainly that the recent talk with Archie had been a severe strain, so Theo only put her arms around her and kissed her over and over.

It was only after Theo's head was on her pillow, and she lay wakefully watching the flickering shadows on her wall, that she thought of the possible effect upon her own life this change of affairs might make. If Archie's expenses must be reduced her own must be too, she thought. She was not less interested in her studies than her brother was in his, and she realized more clearly his state of mind. Puzzling over this new phase of the misfortune, she fell asleep, and awakened only when a perfect day illuminated the world without.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LITTLE LOVE-MAKING.

WITH the coming of morning came a fresh idea to Theo, and, although she regarded with fear and trembling the prospect it suggested, she determinedly brought her mind to bear upon the subject till, by the time she was ready for breakfast, she had fully come to a decision regarding it. It was a perfect Sunday, and the quiet peace of it seemed to have entered the hearts of the entire family as they gathered around the breakfast-table, for the cloud had lifted from Archie's brow, the tired, strained look had left Miss Nelson's face, while Theo seemed to have acquired a new strength and dignity overnight. Val had not been admitted to the discussion of the threatening difficulties, and was as bright and cheerful as was her usual habit. Jack alone was grave, and seemed absorbed in thought, roused only by Val's rallying him on his serious expression.

"Do you always look so on Sundays, Jack?" she questioned. "That is regular old Puritan style. Come, it is too lovely a day to look doleful: if that is the sort of face you are going to wear to church, I shall not go."

Jack roused himself from his revery, and they all set out for church in a seemingly happy mood.

After service Theo joined Nannie Talcott, and the two walked away together in earnest conversation, Theo lingering so far behind that the rest of the family were in-doors before the click of the gate announced her return. When she did join the others in the sitting-room, her eyes were very bright and her cheeks were flushed with excitement. Val, quicker to notice any change in Theo than in any one else, whispered, "What is the matter, Theo? What have you heard?" But Theo seemed to possess unusual impatience, and only shook her head at Val.

But when the afternoon had sent all the others to such affairs as most interested them, Theo sought out her aunt. Miss Nelson put out her hand as Theo entered, and Theo, pulling up a low chair to the couch where her aunt was lying, sat down, eager to unfold the plan which had busied her thoughts that morning.

"I want to consult you, auntie," she began, "and I want you to say 'yes' to what I am going to ask."

"I cannot make rash promises," protested auntie, smiling. "Let me hear what you have to say, dear, and I will do my best to give you a fair audience."

"Well," Theo went on, "you know Archie and I talked over matters last night, and I know, you dear darling, how worried you have been. I think it is a shame, too, with two big strapping youngsters like us to share your burdens." Then, suddenly, "Auntie, I shall be sixteen the second of next month."

"Yes, dear."

"And I am almost a woman."

"Not quite," with a smile.

"But I am not a child any longer. Now don't laugh: I am not trying to be young-ladyish, but I am big enough to help, and I have a way of doing it."

"Go on, dear," as Theo hesitated.

"I thought of it this morning when I first woke up," Theo continued. "Nannie Talcott told me the other day that her aunt had written to ask her if she knew any one among her school-mates who would like to come to her for the summer, to take partial charge of her three children and teach them,—some one who could teach music. Nannie asked me then to which of the girls I would suggest she should make the offer, and we were going to talk it over. Then this morning it popped into my head that I could do it myself. Nannie's aunt wants a young person who would be, she says, more in sympathy with the children."

"No, no, Theo!" auntie exclaimed.

"Now, auntie, just a little more. Listen. You know, or at least Archie says, there is barely enough income to keep up the household expenses. Well, then, where are my tuition-fees to come from?"

Miss Janet was silent.

"You don't want me to stop school yet?"

"No, dear, no."

"Then how is it to be arranged? I *will not* have Archie do it!" vehemently. "Mrs. Parkhurst will pay me enough for the three summer months to pay all my fees next year, except music; but I can let that go one year, and I can practise hard, so as to lose nothing."

Auntie was gravely silent for a while, then she said, "Theo, I cannot consent: it is impossible. It is too

dreadful to think of letting a young, inexperienced child like you go out into the world among entire strangers. I will teach you at home. Archie would be outraged by such a suggestion: it is not right."

"I cannot see the wrong; and you know I don't often differ from your opinion, auntie."

"No, my darling, you do not."

"Then I am going to leave you to think it over," said Theo, rising, for the first time in her life taking the initiative in a matter of judgment. "You will let me know soon, auntie?"

"In an hour," auntie replied.

And Theo took refuge in her own room, feeling that she must win her aunt's consent or be very unhappy; but before the end of the hour she heard Miss Janet's step outside the door.

"It is 'yes'? Say it is, auntie."

Miss Janet shook her head sadly. "I am wondering if I am selfish in the matter," she said. "I do so want your best good, Theo, and I will compromise today by promising to talk it over with Archie and with Nannie Talcott."

Theo, anxious to have the matter definitely settled, hurried off to send Archie to his aunt, and while they were debating upon the subject she went over to bring Nannie Talcott. As Nannie was something more than a year older than Theo, the latter felt that her friend was a much wiser person than herself, and one whose opinion ought to have weight.

Every argument, pro and con, was brought forward, and the discussion ran high, but finally ended in vic-

tory for Theo, though Archie fumed and stormed at the decision, declaring it was placing him in an ignoble light, and that it was a reflection upon his character.

"It is not as if you were forcing me to it," Theo explained; "I am doing it of my own free will; and, Archie dear, I shall only be too proud and happy to have you take care of me when you are really able to; but now—oh, you blessed old stormer!—it will be as much as you can do to make enough to carry yourself through; but if you do, you can 'snap your fingers at the foeman's taunts. And so can your sisters and your cousins and your aunts.'" And Theo laughed down Archie's objections, and he was at length compelled to yield, though with a very bad grace.

At this stage of the proceedings Val was first made acquainted with this unexpected project, and then Jack was informed. Val wept and clung to Theo as if she were to lose her the next moment.

"Oh, Theo," she sobbed, "I had looked forward to the summer with such pleasure,—we were going to have such a lovely time. Do let me write to the colonel for some money. He will give it to me, I know he will."

"No," Theo quietly objected; "I shall feel better to do it all my own self. I have been sheltered and coddled all my life, and I need this, no doubt. You know we must try to be self-reliant, Val." And Theo assumed an air of wisdom suited to one far beyond her years.

The effect on Jack was, in a way, worse than upon Val; for, though he did not shed tears, he looked

gloomier than ever, and seemed to be weighed down by what appeared to him to be the horror of the situation, and at last his feelings reached a climax little expected by unsuspecting Theo.

The girl was in a most exalted mood by reason of her prospective experiment, and with all the inexperience of youth, as well as on account of her idealistic temperament, she saw everything through rose-colored glasses. Not so Jack, who felt as if a lamb were going out to be slaughtered, and he cudgelled his brains to discover some loop-hole of escape for the victim; but only one possible refuge suggested itself,—himself. He put the idea away, but it recurred again and again. So when Theo, gracious through her unexpected sacrifice, cheerfully acceded to his suggestion that they should take a walk through the garden, Jack's one idea was paramount.

They were standing under an apple-tree, which showered its delicate pink-and-white blossoms down upon them. "How lovely it is!" said Theo, lifting her face to the drifting petals. "I wonder if Mrs. Parkhurst has as pretty a place as this, and whether I shall think it so."

Jack looked as if it would give him extreme pleasure to annihilate Mrs. Parkhurst then and there.

"Theo," he said, fiercely, "you must not go."

"Why?" returned Theo, saucily.

"Because it is outrageous. The idea of a girl only sixteen going away among strangers. You shall not go."

"Who's going to prevent me?" asked Theo, more saucily still.

"I," stammered Jack. "Oh, Theo, marry me, and let me take care of you the rest of your life."

Theo gave him one blank look, then, as the meaning of it rushed over her, the blood surged up into her face, and, casting a startled glance behind her, she precipitately fled, never stopping till she reached Miss Nelson's room, where she threw herself on her knees, burying her head in her aunt's lap and sobbing aloud.

"Why, my child! Theo! what is the matter?" asked Miss Nelson, in alarm.

Theo's only answer was a fresh burst of sobs. Miss Nelson, by coaxings and questionings next, drew from her only the word "Jack."

"Jack! What has happened to him?"

"Oh,—he said—such a dreadful thing to me!" Theo tried to explain spasmodically.

"Why, Theo, my darling girl! Jack said a dreadful thing? I cannot believe he meant to hurt your feelings. Tell me all about it." And Theo was finally sufficiently pacified to give a fuller account of Jack's offence.

"It was certainly wrong of Jack," Miss Nelson admitted, "but I would not take it so to heart: he meant, I think, to suggest some way of averting the trouble he feels may be in store for you. There, dearie, don't cry any more. I do not exculpate Jack entirely, but I think he was carried beyond discretion by his intense feeling at the situation. You must think no more of it, and I will talk to him: he should not come into my little dove-cot and frighten one of my doves."

Theo's sobs gradually ceased, but nothing could induce her to go down-stairs again that evening, or to

see Jack again. And Jack felt the punishment very keenly; but he went to Miss Nelson, like the straightforward fellow he was, and said, penitently,—

"I am afraid I have offended Theo beyond forgiveness, Miss Janet, but indeed I did not mean to."

They were such children and treated the affair with such intense seriousness that Miss Nelson, though inwardly half amused, resolved that Jack should understand that she did not countenance his behavior.

"I am afraid you have startled my little girl, Jack," she made answer. "You did not for an instant suppose you had the right to speak in that way to a child like Theo? You are only a boy, I know," she went on, melting at the sight of Jack's remorseful countenance, "but you should have known that Theo is entirely too young to think of lovers; she has never even given such subjects the thought that many girls give, and I want her to be a little girl as long as possible."

"I know," admitted Jack; "but I do love Theo, Miss Janet; I always shall, I think," he faltered; "and I have often dreamed of marrying her some day, if she would have me: so it didn't seem such a strange idea to me. I suppose, and—oh, Miss Janet, it seemed so dreadful to let her go away—and—I know it was perfectly beastly of me, but——" And Jack stammered, becoming so hopelessly mixed that Miss Janet took pity on him, and said,—

"There, never mind, Jack: put all such ideas out of your head for the present, and treat Theo as a brother would. I don't approve of what you have done, but I forgive it, for I know your intention was not un-

worthy. You meant to be manly and generous, but you forgot that it was taking advantage of Theo's youth."

Jack turned away, overpowered by his rash act, and next took his confession to Archie.

"I have been a blundering idiot, Arch, but please don't turn me down. I was desperate, and, like a big, overgrown simpleton, frightened Theo by my rudeness." And he told his tale so dolefully that Archie had to laugh and turn consoler.

"Brace up, old fellow," he said, "and let it blow over. You didn't mean any harm: I know you too well for that. I know you were thinking only of doing the noblest thing you could, but I suspect Theo is all to pieces over it; I'm afraid you'll have a time winning back her confidence."

Which was another bitter drop in Jack's cup. And when he went away the next morning, without even a glimpse of Theo, he was in a very unhappy frame of mind, though Archie's view of the matter was a great comfort to him.

About a week later he came to Archie with a letter in his hand. "I've just heard from my uncle," he said. "How should you like to pass your summer days in his establishment?"

"What do you mean?" asked Archie; for he knew Jack's letters from his uncle were few and far between.

"Well, you know," replied Jack, in an embarrassed sort of way, "my uncle and I don't hit it off very well; he doesn't understand me, and I'm blest if I understand him, but—oh, no matter about the rest. There is a chance for you with him, if you care to take

it. He'll keep you hustling, old man, but the pay isn't bad." And Jack named a salary far beyond Archie's hopes.

"Take it!" he exclaimed: "I'm ready to jump at it. I'm not such a chump as to throw away a chance like that. Look here, Jack, it's all your doing, I know."

"Oh, pshaw!" returned Jack. "I say, Arch, just drop that; it is such a little thing, compared with what you all have done for me." Just what Jack had really done was not known to any of his friends till some years after, for he kept his secret well, never dreaming he had been nobler than another.

It was not a very happy account which Jack gave of his uncle. "The old chap is a regular old pine knot," he maintained; "there isn't a bit of softness or humanity about him. Money is his god, and he thinks I am a perfect renegade because I do not adore it. He never married, because, he always said, he hadn't time, but he is so deathly afraid of getting an extravagant wife that it is really funny. His worst threat is that he will disinherit me; but, bless you, I don't care. I can take care of myself; and he can't beggar me,—that's one comfort; though he might be able to absorb most of my inheritance before I'm of age, if he chooses to be dishonorable about it."

"It seems to me he is making me a very liberal offer for such an old skinflint," was Archie's remark.

Jack flushed up to the roots of his hair. "Oh, that's all right," he said: "don't you bother about that." And, jumping up hastily, he went whistling from the room.

Archie pondered over the matter, but could get

nothing further from Jack; and, though the prospect of a stuffy counting-room and a hard employer was not a very enlivening one, he rejoiced at his opportunity, for it meant another year at college anyhow.

So Archie dug away at his studies with redoubled will, while Jack kept pace with him and was no less earnest a student.

He had promised Archie that he would spend his summer in New York, where Archie's business would take him.

"We'll fix it all right," declared Jack: "I know all about boarding-places and rooms, so you can pitch right in while I do the settling."

And so the May days passed away, bringing them the hard work of examinations, followed by class-day, with all its attendant ceremonies.

Theo and Val were not less absorbed than were the boys. Theo, feeling that her school-days were slipping away, made more than her ordinary effort, and passed her examinations with high honors. Mrs. Parkhurst had promised to be present at the commencement, and Theo felt that she must appear to the best advantage. It was with half fear, half pleasure, that she looked forward to her summer: it was like travelling to an unknown land. The world! She would be in it, and of it. Roseville seemed to shrink into utter insignificance, and that great world beyond held mystery and adventure; trials, perhaps, but experience enfolded in trial; pleasures, maybe, as yet untasted; men and women, new friends—or foes? But the enemy's country was not the one of which Theo dreamed. Her girl-

hood's fancy clothed these creatures waiting upon the threshold of her new experience with virtues and traits born of ideality, beings who should extend only helping hands and lead her into the halls of delight.

And so sitting in her little nest of a room she built air-castles, while she looked out from her embowered window upon the leafy tree-tops and into the starry night.

Conscious of her youth, Theo had feared lest Mrs. Parkhurst should think her too young, and she had surreptitiously lengthened one of her gowns, that upon the occasion of Mrs. Parkhurst's call she might wear it and appear more mature. It was a childish subterfuge, but it gave her more confidence; and when, upon the important day, Mrs. Parkhurst was announced, Theo, with trembling fingers, fastened the hooks and gathered her sunny hair into a low coil, laughing at the remembrance of little Val's "party head," as they called it. Then, with little shivers of dread, and such an inward tremor as she had never known before, she ran down-stairs, where Mrs. Parkhurst awaited her. She had begged that the first interview might be strictly private. "I shall break down, auntie," she said, "if you are there. Just wait till we are through our talk, and then come in." So Miss Nelson had yielded the point, yet with a feeling that her little girl was passing beyond the spot "where brook and river meet," and she was scarcely less nervous than Theo.

Mrs. Parkhurst was a woman of theories, although she was a good woman and a kind one. Her household was ordered upon a strictly theoretical basis,—her

children's education as well,—and Theo was at first rather bewildered at the questions put to her: whether or not Miss Nelson believed in object-teaching; did she require a strict committing to memory; did she endorse a universal method; whether she should insist upon physical culture or not, and if this system or that were preferable; but by degrees Theo began to understand her interlocutor and gave such answers as were satisfactory. Then she must display her proficiency in music, and she secretly thanked the white feather that gave her command over herself, and at last Mrs. Parkhurst expressed herself content.

"I shall return day after to-morrow," she announced. "Would it be possible for you to accompany me?"

But Theo was aghast at the proposition, and hastened to explain that it would suit her much better to be allowed more time for preparation.

"Then you can join me next week?" suggested Mrs. Parkhurst.

"Oh, yes, I think so," answered Theo.

"You know our place is on the Hudson," returned Mrs. Parkhurst. "I think you will like it there. It is a belief of mine that it is better the children should study all summer. I have tried the sea-shore for them, but it is my opinion that the restlessness of the ocean provokes a corresponding restlessness of brain, and I fancy it is better for the children's nervous systems to have them placed under quieter influences. I hope you are not nervous and flighty, Miss Nelson; that is my chief objection to older persons: they are apt to develop nervousness."

Theo assured her that she was neither nervous nor flighty, to the best of her knowledge, and so the interview ended, and Miss Janet came in, after which Theo thankfully retired from the room, leaving her aunt to make such statements as she might consider necessary.

Val had been sitting on the top step of the stairs, ready to pounce upon Theo the moment she should appear.

"Oh, you poor dear!" she whispered, "is it over? Was it very dreadful, and were your hands very cold and your face very hot?"

Theo laughed: "It wasn't so awful, but it was bad enough, I suppose: still, I have come out alive, and that is something."

"Tell me about it."

"Come into the sitting-room, then: auntie is talking to Mrs. Parkhurst, and I must run down when I hear her get up to go. Well," she continued, after they were safely seated, "there are three children, you know, that I am to teach; there are two or three others,—a young lady about nineteen, just 'out,' and a son, I don't know how old,—a young man, I fancy; but I am to teach four hours a day,—that isn't much, you see,—and I am to be with the children when they are not with the nursemaid. Mrs. Parkhurst has some queer ideas, but she seems good and kind."

"I am so relieved!" sighed Val. "I thought she might be a regular old snapping-turtle."

"No, she is not," Theo laughingly replied; "she is really very nice; and if the others are equally so, I shall not mind it. There! I hear the door open. I must run and make my adieux properly."

CHAPTER XIV.

A JOURNEY.

"WITH Jack to give me backbone, I shall be all right," said Archie. "You don't suppose I mind the old curmudgeon, Val? I'm bigger than he is any day." For Val had been expressing her fears of "the ogre," as she called Jack's uncle, saying, "Oh, Archie, I can almost imagine him saying, 'Fee! fo! fum!' Oh, dear," she complained, "what shall I do, with everybody gone? It seems like coming to the jumping-off place with nothing beyond."

"What did you do last summer?" inquired Theo.

"I went home with one of the girls, you know, after school closed, and then I came here the first of September; but, you see, I hadn't you all then, and didn't know what I was missing. You certainly are the dearest people in the world. It seems now as if I had been here always,—as if this dear old spot were my very birthplace."

"That's because of the Nelson blood," said Archie, proudly.

"I'm afraid your Nelson blood won't count for much in New York," remarked Theo. "Oh, Archie, do you suppose I shall ever see you? We shall not be so very far apart, you know."

"Humph! I don't know. I reckon I shall be kept with my nose to the grindstone pretty closely. I doubt if I get many outings; and I suspect you will not find many holidays, either."

Theo looked grave, but, catching sight of her aunt viewing her with tender regard, she smiled brightly, and said, "Never mind, I will make it all holiday. I will imagine I am just visiting, and am teaching the children just for fun to fill in the time."

"That is the most cheerful view of the case I could imagine," responded Archie. "I hope you can keep it up, The."

"Who's croaking now?" retorted Theo. "I'm not going to have the blues, for one."

But it was a very timid little heart, for all the bravery of the smiling mouth, with which Theo finally started on her journey. Archie and she were going together as far as New York, where Jack would meet them, and the two boys would see Theo safely on the boat which was to take her to her destination.

At the last moment there was a sob in Theo's voice as she gave Val a hug and tremulously said, "Oh, Val, do love auntie as hard as ever you can."

And Val, in a torrent of tears, answered, "I will, Theo; indeed I will."

Then Theo swallowed the lump in her throat, and with smiling lips, but swimming eyes, kissed her auntie, and, never turning to look back, rushed forward to join Archie, who had made his adieux hurriedly and was standing with his face turned from the little group, determined not to lend his countenance to these tearful

proceedings, though it is extremely likely that moisture was not very far from his own eyes.

Mammy, quite broken down, had retired to the fence-corner, and Eldorado Ann—so clean you would scarcely have known her—held a bunch of June roses, which she thrust into Theo's hand, running after her down the street till Archie sent her home, to which she returned in a very spotty condition: having fallen down by the way, and her hands in consequence being covered with dust, she had rubbed her teary face with them so that a streaked, stained, and very woe-begone countenance showed itself on her return.

"Three whole months!" sighed Val. And then, seeing Miss Janet could stand no more, she struggled to keep back her tears; and, picking up Ishmael, she deposited him in Miss Janet's lap, where he purred and cuddled till auntie confessed him quite a comfort.

It seemed such a little thing, the journey of this young pair, when one considered the thousands of travellers rushing through the country over this road and that, crowding the dépôts and filling the trains; they seemed to themselves so small a part of this busy moving throng. But to the woman heart at home it was as if she had sent forth her darlings to battle, armed only with youth and innocence, with the pebbles of truth and honor, of courage and faith and single-heartedness, from the brook of principle, with which to fight that great giant, the world; and who could say which should prevail?

The short trips which Theo and Archie had heretofore taken were as nothing in comparison with this new

starting out. Archie had been once to Washington, and they had both been to Norfolk and Old Point, but the enchanted land which the very name New York suggested was something distinctly different from this home ground, and what brilliant prospects were presented to their mental vision as they were borne along only expectant youth can know.

At last they steamed into Jersey City, and even Jack's tall form was hard to discern among the throng hurrying hither and thither, but he soon distinguished them, and Theo's relief at seeing his familiar face gave her the first realizing sense of what it meant to be "a stranger in a strange land." This fact did away with all embarrassment at meeting him again.

"Here you are!" cried Jack, beaming upon them. "It is too bad, Theo, that you cannot stop over for a few days; but I suppose you must get the afternoon boat." And he hurried them along to the ferry-boat.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Theo, as the harbor, with its swarm of vessels, burst upon her view. "Oh, Archie, look at all those masts and spars! See! is that a war-vessel?"

"No," laughed Jack; "that is only an ocean steamer."

"How I wish I were on it!" said Theo. "Just think of all those people going to Europe! and I don't suppose it means anything at all to most of them."

"Should you like to go so much?" asked Jack.

"It is my dream," returned Theo, with her eyes fixed on the big vessel; "but it seems very, very

unlikely now." And she came back to the thought of what the end of this journey meant.

Jack gave a little frown, but just then the ferry-boat touched her pier, and in a trice Jack was piloting them through the crowd.

"I'll see to the baggage, Arch: let me take your checks. No, you keep yours, and I'll hurry Theo's off first. Just wait a minute." And, leaving them in the waiting-room, Jack rushed off, and was back in a few minutes, bustling them into a cab which he hailed.

"I don't want to leave you high and dry, Arch," he said, "but if there is no one aboard whom I know, I shall go up with Theo myself. Do you think you could manage without me, old boy? My! but it warms 'the cockles of my heart' to see you!" And he gave Archie a rousing slap on the back.

"I'll manage all right," returned Archie.

"The cab can take you right to your quarters," explained Jack, "and I can come down on the train."

Theo protested, but Jack's determined look showed her that he was not to be turned from his purpose if occasion required.

But after seeing Theo safely settled on the deck of the steamer, and scrutinizing each of her fellow-passengers, Jack at last rushed up to an old gentleman with,—

"Ah, Mr. Smith, glad to see you, sir. You're going in just the right direction, and I know you'll be glad to see to my friend Miss Nelson."

"Humph! Hate girls," snapped the old man.

Jack laughed. No one could withstand that cheery, happy laugh. "Well, you don't hate me, you know: so I'm sure it will be all right."

"His bark is worse than his bite," said Jack in an aside to Theo. "It is Mr. Smith, an old friend of my father's. Now you are all right: he gets off at your landing. I would go all the way, but I hate to leave Arch in the lurch. You don't mind?"

"Not in the least," replied Theo, rather relieved that she was not to have Jack's company. "I'll get along beautifully. There, we are going to start: you will have to hurry." And with a wave of his hat Jack disappeared.

Mr. Smith sat absorbed in his newspaper, while Theo dreamily watched the shores. There was no one to whom she could turn with expressions of delight as the steamer ploughed her way up the beautiful river, and as each moment took Theo farther and farther away from those who loved her, a long sigh broke from the full heart as the remembrance of home and auntie rushed over her.

"What is the matter?" And Theo jumped suddenly at the question, forgetting about Mr. Smith, who was regarding her with keen eyes.

"Nothing," she faltered; "that is—it is all so new and strange."

"Where do you live?"

"In Virginia."

"Where are you going?"

"To Newburgh, to Mrs. Parkhurst's."

"What for?"

"To teach her children," blushing under the keen scrutiny.

"Humph! You are too young."

"I am sixteen," drawing herself up.

An amused smile played around Mr. Smith's mouth. "What Nelson?" he presently asked.

"My father was Theodore Nelson, and my grandfather Archibald Nelson."

"Then Janet Nelson is your aunt?"

"Yes." And again at the remembrance of auntie Theo's eyes filled.

Mr. Smith regarded her steadily for a few minutes. "I'm coming to see you," he finally said. Then, returning to his newspaper, he spoke not another word till the boat reached Newburgh.

Theo, meanwhile, wondered who he could be, and how he came to know about her aunt Janet; whether he had ever known her personally, or had merely learned of her through Jack's account of the family. She longed to ask, but did not dare, and, the wharf being reached, the stern fact of being really there drove all fancies out of her head.

Mrs. Parkhurst, herself, was waiting, and greeted Theo very cordially. Then, seeing her companion, she said, "Why, Mr. Smith, so you have Miss Nelson in charge?" And she looked curiously at Theo to see how she had stood what seemed to be rather a surprise to herself.

"I have, madam," was Mr. Smith's reply, curtly given, "and I shall give myself the pleasure of calling upon her." And he turned away to where his carriage

was in waiting, while Mrs. Parkhurst directed Theo to her own stylish buckboard. Theo rather enjoyed the sensation of driving behind the swift horses with such a fine coachman on the box, and she wondered what Val would say if she could see her.

"How did you happen to meet Mr. Smith?" asked Mrs. Parkhurst, unable to curb her curiosity.

"A friend put me in his charge," replied Theo.

"Did you not come with your brother?"

"Yes; but Jack Allen met us."

"What! old Silas Allen's nephew?"

"Yes, I believe his uncle is named Silas,—it is some such name. My brother has a position in his office."

"Oh!" And Mrs. Parkhurst nodded comprehensively.

"Mr. Smith is a neighbor of ours," she informed Theo, after a little pause. "He is very odd, and has never been in our house at all. He professes to dislike women generally, and despises young ones especially; but you appear to have been an exception." And Mrs. Parkhurst seemed amused. "He is a very successful lawyer," she went on, "and I believe he is said to be really very kind when you can get underneath the crust, but he does not attract persons, in general, with his brusque manner."

"He scared me nearly to death," admitted Theo, "but he seemed to know who the Nelsons are," secretly glad that the Nelsons were not unknown even in this far-off spot; a fact Theo did not consider at all strange, being only glad of the family's claim to recognition.

Mrs. Parkhurst laughed. "That is a true Virgin-

ian," she said. "You will find family very frequently thrust aside for gold up this way."

"Both are very desirable," replied Theo; "but auntie says real merit is better than either."

Mrs. Parkhurst smiled: "Your aunt is quite old-fashioned, is she not?"

Theo opened her eyes. Auntie, her auntie, whose advanced views were the surprise of all Theo's schoolmates,—auntie old-fashioned! But just then the horses turned in towards a showy modern house, and Theo knew she was at the end of her journey.

The magnificence of the landscape gardening, the smoothly-rolled walks, the carefully-cut grass, were things that Theo was quite unused to in her own neighborhood. "I never saw anything like it, except in a cemetery," she afterwards wrote to auntie. How different it all was from the sweet tangle of their own home garden, where vines grew at will and where flower-beds were tended only by bees and butterflies, except when weeds made too great an inroad!

A smart-looking maid met them in the hall, and Theo was conducted to her room next the nursery, where she heard the voices of children in lively discussion. She decided she would make their acquaintance without further delay, and, opening the door, walked into their midst, looking around with a smile.

A dead silence fell upon the group: the eldest, a girl of about twelve years, was sitting on a table, swinging her feet back and forth; two little boys of six and eight were sitting on the floor with a toy theatre between them; while the fourth, a baby girl of three, stood with

her finger in her mouth for a moment, and then, running up to Theo, said, "Who is you?"

"I am Miss Theo Nelson. And who are you?"

"I's Pinky Pokkus."

Theo sat down and took the little one on her lap, saying, "Tell me who the others are, Miss Pinky Pokkus."

"Zis is Zamie, and zat is Zene," responded Miss Pinky, pointing her little fat finger at the two boys, "and zat naughty ittle dirl is Fan; she is werry naughty," shaking her head gravely.

"Is she?" replied Theo. "I am very sorry."

The nursemaid, who had been absent from the room, now returned, and Theo, after explaining her presence, went back to her room.

"Zat is a pitty lady," she heard Pinky say.

"She ain't," from Fan, defiantly.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear—oh, dear, where—is—my—good man?" laboriously read Eugene, going on with his play of Jack the Giant-Killer; while Jamie, absorbed in the pulling of the proper strings, took no further notice of the interruption.

The sound of wheels and of voices below-stairs gave Theo the impression that there must be several more members of the family, and, though not specially shy of strangers, she was a girl keenly affected by personality, and dreaded more than any one imagined the proximity of antagonistic natures. What new element she was to encounter she did not know, and when dinner was announced by a dignified colored man it was with timid steps that she descended to the hall, where Mrs. Parkhurst was waiting for her.

In a few minutes she found herself face to face with the entire family and several strangers as well.

Mr. Parkhurst was a rather pompous individual, with a way of stating his opinions as though he would say, "Dispute it if you dare." Felix, the eldest son, had a lazy way of speaking and lifting his eyes that Theo thought rather elegant; he had a bored, dissatisfied look, which made Theo feel very sorry for him, unsophisticated little girl that she was. Leonore, the eldest daughter, combined her father's pompous, decided manner with her mother's leaning towards theories, and, though not a really disagreeable-looking person, had, as Theo described her to Val, "curly nostrils and a flounce around her nose." There were several guests,—a young woman, with her rapid-breathing, quick-speaking mother, and a young man, "who looked as if his face were drawn on an egg-shell, and as if he were afraid to speak for fear the egg-shell would break;" another of Theo's descriptions. Fan, Jamie, and Eugene were also at the table, Theo being placed between Jamie, who sat nearest his mother, and Fan, who sat next her sister Leonore. Jamie was a dear, confiding little soul, and before the dinner was over his hand had stolen into Theo's lap, and he had smiled up into her face as she gave it a little squeeze. He had curly auburn hair, the most innocent eyes, and a wistful little mouth, and was the very opposite of Fan, whose mass of dark hair, hanging over her fierce black eyes, she was constantly tossing back, reminding one of an untamed young colt. Eugene was an every-day sort of boy, neither very brilliant nor very dull, and

seemed to Theo the most commonplace of the children.

It was a long evening to Theo. Miss Leonore devoted herself to the egg-faced young man, whose name was Tucker; Mr. Felix carried on a lively conversation with Miss Andrews, whose mother argued breathlessly with Mr. Parkhurst upon the subject of taxes; while Mrs. Parkhurst, seated in a corner of the drawing-room with Theo, gave the latter a theoretical idea of the characters of her children, or rather described the sort of persons into which she imagined they would develop. Theo found her mind wandering as Mrs. Parkhurst talked on and on. She wondered what auntie and Val were doing. They were sitting on the porch, no doubt, and the June night surrounded them. She could smell the roses and honeysuckle; she could fancy Ishmael prowling about interested in the mysterious attractions the night afforded; she could see mammy sitting on the low step of her little house, singing to herself; and Archie—she could not outline Archie's surroundings. Then she came back with a start to the ornate drawing-room, glittering with white and gold, with crystal chandeliers and expensive bric-à-brac; and it was with a sigh of relief that she heard Mrs. Parkhurst suggest that she might like to retire to her room, as she was doubtless tired.

Once there, she knelt by the open window and put her head down on the sill, a tired, homesick little girl, striving vainly to believe in herself and in her strength to struggle through the three months that now seemed to have doubled their length.

There were no waving tree-tops near by to whisper her their good-night message, for it was one of Mrs. Parkhurst's theories that trees made the place damp, and, with the exception of two or three at a distance from the house, there were none; vines were also tabooed for the same reason; porches, too, kept off the sun, and only a few little balconies were allowed. So the house stood obtrusively asserting itself from its green lawn with all the pomposity of its owner. Theo's apartment, with all its elegant appointments, seemed to her empty and comfortless compared to the dear room in the gable with its home-made furnishings and leaf-hung window. So Theo looked up to the silent stars, that were watching, too, above her own dear home, and to them she whispered her good-night.

CHAPTER XV.

HOMESICK.

THEO was awakened by the children in the next room, by Pinky's merry laugh and by Jamie's sweet little voice questioning the nursemaid. With a start and a sudden realizing sense of where she was, she sprang up ready to face the business of the day.

One end of the nursery was to be devoted to her use as a school-room, and, having arranged it to her satisfaction, nine o'clock saw the little teacher at her post, ready to begin her new duties.

The little boys were as docile as possible, and sat cheerfully with books and slates before them.

"Where is Fan?" asked Theo. "She should be here."

"She said she wasn't coming," replied Eugene.

This was unexpected. Evidently Miss Fan intended to wage war from the outset. Theo was puzzled for a moment, hardly knowing how to act. She disliked to acknowledge any difficulty so early to Mrs. Parkhurst, and, hearing that Miss Fan was in her own room, she concluded to hunt her up.

"We are all ready, Fan," she announced, cheerfully. "It is nine o'clock."

No answer; only a toss of the mane.

"Come." And Theo put out her hand.

"I'm not going to mind you," declared Miss Fan.

Theo walked farther into the room, saying, "Then suppose I mind you. What should you like to have me to do?"

Fan shot a look of surprise at her, not quite knowing how to take such tactics. She was silent a moment, and then said, "I should like you to jump out of the window."

Such an unexpected reply brought surprise in its turn to Theo, but she gathered her forces and walked directly to the window. "Do you really want me to do that? Look and see how high it is above the ground."

Fan craned her neck and looked over, wondering what was coming next.

"If I were to jump out I should hurt myself; perhaps it would kill me; anyhow, I should very likely break my leg or my arm. Do you think it is pleasant to see persons in pain?"

No answer from Fan; but she drew in her head.

"Did you ever read about the man who was shut in the room with a maniac?" Fan shook her head.

"The maniac," Theo went on, "insisted that they should jump from the window, and the man did not know what to do to escape, but finally he said, 'Ho! that isn't anything to do; any one can jump out of a window. I'll tell you what is a great deal harder: to go down to the ground and jump up.' That struck the crazy man's fancy, and he opened the door so they could go down."

"Did the man get away?" asked Fan, eagerly.

"Yes, and the maniac was captured. I read that story in one of my aunt's books."

Fan stood looking at her. "I don't want you to jump out of the window," she said; "but I don't want to come to school."

"Well, I must go back," Theo replied. "After a while I am going to read a lovely fairy-story to the boys, and if you want to hear it, we shall be glad to have you." And, nodding brightly, she left the room.

Fan sat for a while wondering what she should do next. She was a contrary, selfish sort of a child, but she loved fairy-stories beyond everything. It was very stupid sitting there with nothing to do, so she believed, after all, she would go back to the nursery; and pretty soon she made her appearance, but she kept at the other end of the room, where Pinky and the nurse were, until, seeing that no one was watching her, by degrees she drew nearer and nearer, and finally slipped into her seat.

Theo took no notice of her for some time, but at length she began an interesting tale connected with some fact in history, which drew from Miss Fan the remark, "I'd like to study that. Give me the book." And they proceeded with a lesson in history forthwith.

Once settled to her work, Fan became more interested, and the fairy-tale was such a real joy and delight that the first morning passed away without further trouble.

But as the days went on each brought some trial. Jamie adored his teacher, but he was little given to

application, and had a most unique way of giving his reading-lesson, usually describing in his own language the picture at the top of the page, and it was only by the strictest methods that Theo could make him keep his eyes upon the book. Eugene's bugbear was his arithmetic, and he writhed and twisted his body into such contortions over "If five horses can eat a ton of hay," etc., that Theo felt sorry for him, but patiently tried to explain over and over again.

Left to themselves both boys would have been very tractable, but Fan's evil spirit always prompted her to say just the thing which would be the most tantalizing. Jamie's auburn locks were his sensitive point; and so varied and ingenious were Fan's remarks about them that the little fellow would get himself worked up into a perfect rage. There was always some one whom Fan selected as her victim; if it were not one of the boys, Theo herself would be pitched upon. Fan would upset the ink in some spot where Theo would be sure to get her fingers dabbled; she would mislay books on purpose; she even entered Theo's room and threw from her window-ledge a flower-pot bearing a precious forget-me-not which Val had sent from the garden, declaring it had been pushed out accidentally. The child's inventive powers were rich in means of annoying her teacher, and it always seemed just the thing which on that particular day would be the hardest to bear. If she knew Theo wanted specially to have the afternoon to herself, she would contrive to be kept in the school-room, obstinately refusing to study some lesson. If there were guests at dinner, she would

manage that a glass of water should be overturned in Theo's plate or lap, till Theo felt, time after time, a wild desire to shake the little witch-like creature till her teeth should chatter.

As the days went on, these sore trials only added to Theo's homesickness, and many a tear-blistered letter found its way to her home. It was a dreadful thing to the girl who had wakened every morning with a sense of gladness for the dawn, to feel that daylight only brought her a round of duties which even Jamie's loving hugs and kisses could not lighten. Every night her pillow was wet with tears, and she longed—oh, how she longed!—for auntie's mother arms about her; for Archie's shoulder to cry out her sorrows upon; for Val's little hand to stroke her hot, tired head; even for mammy's capacious lap to rest in. Poor little homesick girl! Once or twice she was obliged to rush precipitately from the table, hardly finding voice to excuse herself, as she felt the tears welling up to her eyes at the remembrance of some little homely incident which was too much for her self-control.

Mrs. Parkhurst smiled indulgently on these occasions, and at Theo's apology would say, "It is of no consequence, Miss Nelson; of course you were probably a little over-fatigued."

Despite all this the girl determined not to give up, and day after day she battled on, despising her lack of self-control, yet all the time gaining a store of self-reliance which should strengthen her character and ennoble it; but it was a hard, hard season, and only her pride and unfaltering will kept her from running away from it all.

Miss Leonore looked at her in astonishment, wondering that she did not feel herself blessed beyond degree at the privileges she enjoyed; and she brought her theories to bear upon the subject, but found no solution, "for unless," she said to herself, "Miss Nelson is really abnormal, there can be no reason why she should not consider herself in clover." For Theo was too young to hide her feelings, and her red eyes and depressed manner, at times, showed too clearly how she felt. However, she was indefatigable in her teaching, and Mrs. Parkhurst was delighted at the children's interest and progress.

"It must be a very remarkable place where you live," observed Miss Leonore one day. "I should really like to see it."

"There is nothing remarkable about it," Theo answered. "What makes you think so?"

"Why, you seem to find it so uninteresting here by comparison."

Theo blushed, and replied, "It is only because that is home."

"But I cannot imagine why you should not prefer it here. I know I should prefer other places to this. The Tuckers have a beautiful place," she added, after reflection.

Theo smiled at the thought of Mr. Tucker, in her innocence never dreaming that his property could be any reason for Miss Leonore's evident admiration of the young man himself.

Miss Leonore looked at her sharply. "Mr. Tucker is such a desirable man," she informed Theo.

"What does he do?" asked Theo, wondering what hidden qualities he could possess.

"Do? He doesn't do anything."

"I didn't mean that, exactly. I meant, in what way is he so desirable?"

"Why, don't you know? He is worth nearly a million."

"Is he? But——" And Theo stopped.

"But what?"

"I was only wondering," replied Theo, hesitatingly, —"I was just thinking what a pity it is that people with so much money cannot buy brains."

Miss Leonore blushed in her turn. "He doesn't need brains," she remarked, haughtily, and left Theo wondering what he used in place of them.

"He may be very good," she consoled herself with thinking, and quite censured herself for not having given him credit for that.

A day or two later Miss Leonore returned to the subject. "I don't believe you really despise money," she said. "Mamma tells me you know Jack Allen."

Puzzled to know what Jack had to do with despising money, Theo answered, "I don't despise money. I think it is perfectly delightful to have it."

"Oh! I thought you believed 'money is the root of all evil.'"

"Auntie says," Theo returned, "that people get a wrong idea about that. They say 'money is the root of all evil,' when it isn't money at all; it is 'the *love* of money.'"

"I believe that is it," acknowledged Miss Leonore.

"And auntie says," Theo went on, "that it is the inordinate love of money, it is the sacrificing of honor, and principle, and all the qualities that would make fine character, to gain mere money, that is wrong. Money is a means to an end, and if the end is a worthy one we must not employ an unworthy way of getting hold of the means to accomplish the end."

Miss Leonore sat and pondered over this. "I can't understand," she presently remarked. "You are really a very deep, obscure person, Miss Nelson."

"I!" exclaimed Theo, such an estimate of her character never before having been given her. "I am only telling you what auntie says."

"What about Jack Allen?" asked Miss Leonore, after a pause.

"What about him? He is a friend of my brother's."

"You know he will be very well off?"

"Will he?"

"Don't you know he will?"

"I never thought much about it."

"You don't mean it! Why, his uncle is one of the wealthiest men in the city."

"That doesn't mean Jack is," replied Theo. "I believe Jack is a good fellow. Archie says he is."

"Archie is your brother?"

"Yes."

"Of course he thinks so, then," returned Miss Leonore, raising her eyebrows.

Theo was annoyed beyond measure at this, but could think of nothing to say in refutation, so was silent, though Miss Leonore's suspicion of Archie enraged her

whenever she thought of it. It seemed hard that a single-hearted, sincere friendship should be invested with such a motive.

It took a long time for Theo's eyes to be opened to absolute worldly wisdom, and if she, with her high ideals and ignorance of the ways of the world, proved a constant sort of surprise to Miss Leonore, no less were Miss Leonore's adroit managings, her valuations of life, her ideas of success, revelations to Theo; and she wondered more and more at this new world of whose standards she had never dreamed. "But what do you think people ought to strive for?" she asked Miss Leonore one day when that young lady had been laughing at what she called Theo's quixotisms.

"Strive for? To be rich, to be successful. I know what would suit me: to have the finest establishment, the most charming toilets, give the most bewildering entertainments, and have all the yachts and horses I wanted."

"Shouldn't you get dreadfully tired of it all?" asked Theo, simply. "That seems such an empty way of living, to me. I should hate to have to meet all sorts of stupid people whether I wanted to or not. Of course they wouldn't all be stupid, but I should so much rather have a few really congenial friends than to have so many and just sit up to be looked at by them. It seems to me so much more exciting to be something."

"That is just what I want,—to be something, to be somebody. If I were Mrs. Tucker, now, for instance, think what a fine time I could have."

"Oh," Theo began, but, remembering that she had once before rather deprecated Mr. Tucker's want of brains, to Miss Leonore's disapproval, she changed her sentence, saying, "I suppose Mr. Tucker is very good."

"He doesn't have to be," laughed Miss Leonore, "with all his money."

Theo stared. Not have to be good! What views of life were these? "I thought everybody ought to be good," she said.

"Oh, you unsophisticated little creature!" replied Miss Leonore; "he is good enough for all intents and purposes. Goodness! I wouldn't have such a conscience as yours for anything; it would wear me out. I'd like to be perfectly fascinating and rolling in money. I ask no more."

Nannie had warned Theo that her cousin would be of a very different way of thinking from themselves. "My aunt married a wealthy man. I don't think he is very cultured, but he is not a bad man, if he does lack refinement, and thinks money can compensate for everything. Leonore has heard that all her life, so you must not wonder at her," she had said to Theo.

"You talk just like Nan," Miss Leonore had said. "I know now where she got all her notions. We quite despair of her." And so in this new atmosphere did the tedious summer days slip by.

Little Jamie was Theo's greatest solace, and seemed to her to be the fairest one of the flock, though his father frowned him down, and expressed his opinion that Jamie would never be sharp enough to make a success of himself,—an opinion Theo inwardly resented,

and she cuddled her little favorite closer, while he repaid her by a love and devotion he gave no one else. They took long walks together, when Theo would show him the same woodland wonders which had made the world a fairy-land to her childish eyes; and she would sit with him in her arms through the summer evenings, whispering him tales of the fire-flies, of the moths, of the stars in the sky, or the birds in the trees, till the blue eyes drooped and the curly head dropped on her shoulder.

Fan never could be entirely tamed, and was one day all alert interest, and the next as unapproachable as possible. Pinky was every one's pet, and was alike fond of all; while Eugene was his father's boy. So Jamie and Theo had it all to themselves.

It was one day early in August that Theo was summoned to the drawing-room, where she found Mr. Smith being entertained by Miss Leonore.

"You thought I had forgotten you," was the old man's greeting.

"No; I only wondered if you had," was Theo's reply.

"And you wouldn't have cared much if you had been right," he said.

Theo laughed, but did not deny the accusation.

"I have come to take you to drive. Can you go?" was Mr. Smith's next remark, ignoring Miss Leonore's presence.

"I think so," replied Theo, a little hesitatingly.

"Well, run along and get your bonnet. I will wait outside for you. Don't prink; I want you just as you are."

Theo looked down at her pink gingham frock, but took him at his word, and presently returned to find the old man standing on the front step. Miss Leonore, having felt that she was being treated rather cavalierly, had disappeared.

Mr. Smith looked up approvingly. "That's right," he said. "I thought I could trust you not to keep me waiting." And in another moment Theo found herself behind a pair of fine black horses, while Mr. Smith took the reins, and they were off at a smart pace.

Out of the grounds and on the road, Mr. Smith turned to her abruptly with, "So you don't like money?"

"That is a mistake," was Theo's answer. "I do like money. It was Miss Leonore who told you that, I am sure; but my aunt has taught me to consider some other things worth more. I shouldn't be here," she said, wistfully, "if it were not for my wanting money."

Mr. Smith looked at her sharply.

"You see," Theo went on, confidingly, "I want to study, and that is the only reason it seems worth while to earn money just now. I would give up everything for the sake of being with auntie again, if it were not for that. You spoke of my aunt, Mr. Smith: do you know her?"

"Never saw her in my life," was his puzzling reply, touching the whip lightly to his horses.

"I don't believe rich people are always so very, *very* happy," said Theo, forgetting that her companion came under the category. "It seems to me they are so busy trying to be amused that they haven't time to enjoy

themselves, and they miss real affection, and study, and the really delightful things."

"That's all sentiment. Sentiment is bad for you," was Mr. Smith's reply.

"Is it?" said Theo, wonderingly. "I don't suppose I know, but it seems to me we were all a great deal happier at Roseville than any people I have seen here. But it isn't comfortable to be poor," she sighed. "We had just enough, and now we have just too little. They say 'poverty is no disgrace,' and I think it ought to be true. But why do people look down on poverty, then?"

Mr. Smith was silent a minute, then he said, "It is because persons who are poor are often so from some fault or weakness. That is not an admirable quality. It isn't always so, mind you. Circumstance often is not to be overcome,—circumstance and environment; but we admire courage, perseverance, energy, thrift, self-reliance, promptness, all qualities to help one get rich; while we do not admire cowardice, indecision, laziness, extravagance, weak self-indulgence, and procrastination. I think that is why originally poverty was despised; it meant that the better qualities brought success, while the worse ones brought failure. A poor man may be a very good man, and a rich one a very bad one,—I am sorry to say it is as often one way as it is the other,—but the elements of success and failure are in the qualities of which I speak. Am I talking over your head?"

"Oh, no. Thank you, Mr. Smith: I like to hear you: that is the way auntie talks to me, and it makes

a great many things clear to me; but I suppose we have to get used to the exceptions after we learn the rule. It is like learning French verbs: the exceptions are the hardest part."

They bowled along through the beautiful country, and Theo chattered away, feeling more in her element with this brusque old man than she did with any of the Parkhurst family, unless it were Jamie. By degrees, and without realizing it, she gave Mr. Smith a full account of her home, of auntie, of Val, and of Archie and his friends. She even told him about mammy and Eldorado Ann, and the old man listened attentively, till at last they drew up again before the door and the drive was over.

"I have enjoyed the drive so much," Theo said.

"You look better," declared Mr. Smith. "You were pale when we started."

And, indeed, the roses had come back to her cheeks. It had been so delightful to talk of them all at home to one interested listener. "It was so good of you to take me." And she smiled up into Mr. Smith's face so confidingly that he smiled back and said,—

"Perhaps I enjoyed the drive as much as you."

"Did you? I hope you did," Theo answered. "But I am afraid I chattered like a magpie."

"I don't mind that kind of chatter." And, gathering up his lines, Mr. Smith drove off.

"Well," was Miss Leonore's greeting, "how did you get along with that old bear? Didn't he scare you to death?"

"No," Theo replied; "he was as kind as could

be. We talked about just the nicest things imaginable."

Miss Leonore stared. "I told you you were a very deep, subtle person," she said. And Theo pondered over the remark as she went to her room to dress for dinner, but could not understand it, and turned to the memory of her drive, glad to discover that her crusty old friend had disabused her of the idea that all rich people were stupid, a fancy she had been fast beginning to believe a fact.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. SMITH.

Two or three weeks passed, during which Theo saw nothing more of Mr. Smith; but one Saturday afternoon something drew her attention from the letter she was writing to Val. She stopped to listen. "That sounded just like the robin-whistle," she said to herself. "Could it be Archie?" She listened again. "It must have been really a robin, but it sounded like the dear old whistle;" for an imitation of the robin's note had been the signal upon which the little group had agreed as specially their own.

Theo returned to her writing. "There it is again," she declared, going to the window. And there she saw Archie,—actually flesh-and-blood Archie,—who, with Jack, was walking up from the gate.

Down went letter, pen, and all, and Theo flew downstairs and through the hall, regardless of strangers in the drawing-room or of the dignified presence of the butler by the door. Another moment, and, with a cry of delight, she was in Archie's arms, laughing, crying, and exclaiming,—

"Oh, Archie, how did you get here? When did you come?"

Jack stood smilingly by, entirely unnoticed, but

waiting his turn. And at last Theo found breath enough to greet him.

"It is good to see you too, Jack," she said, cordially. "How natural it does seem!" Then, bursting into tears, she threw herself into Archie's arms again, unconscious that visitors were just leaving and were regarding her curiously.

"Don't, Theo, don't!" protested Archie. "Let us go inside. Goodness, but your tear-factory has increased its facilities! You'll have to advertise it."

Theo laughed through her tears, and led the way to the library.

"We have come to take you back with us," Archie announced.

"Back! Where?"

"To Mr. Smith's."

"Mr. Smith's?" in astonishment.

"Yes," Archie coolly replied: "we have come over from there with a special invitation for you to pass Sunday under Mr. Smith's roof."

"What in the world—how in the world——?" Theo began.

"Never mind," Archie interrupted. "Get ready and come along. There will be no trouble about your being gone till Monday, I suppose?"

"No, I think not, if I can be ready to begin lessons on Monday at nine o'clock." Then, leaving the boys, Theo flew off to make her preparations, and, having stated the case to Mrs. Parkhurst, found no obstacle in the way of her going.

"Mr. Smith wanted us to drive over," Jack ex-

plained, "but we thought we could surprise you better by walking."

"It *was* a surprise," Theo replied, her face beaming with delight. "When I heard the robin-whistle I could scarcely believe my ears: I *didn't* believe them at first. Tell me how you happened to come, and all about it. Oh, there is so much to talk about, I don't know where to begin."

"We'll tell you everything presently," Archie returned, with a sly look at Jack. "Why, after all, Mr. Smith is bound we shall not walk." For as they came out they found a carriage in waiting, and, after a parting hug and kiss for Jamie, who had followed Theo and was now standing disconsolately on the steps, Theo left what Archie called "the halls of the rich and the great," and they were carried along swiftly towards Mr. Smith's place, a mile or so away.

"Here we are," said Jack, as the carriage drew up before a comfortable-looking mansion set in among trees and shrubbery. "Run in, Theo."

With the boys close behind her she entered the wide door-way, but, coming from the sunlight into the darker hall, she did not see a little figure which flew swiftly towards her, clasping her tightly around the neck and crying, "Oh, darling! oh, darling!"

"Val!" cried Theo. "Oh, you dear blessed thing! What does it mean? Is auntie——?"

"No, auntie isn't," interrupted Archie. "There are no more secreted in dark corners. Don't look alarmed, Theo: you are safe from any more onslaughts. These are all."

"How about me?" suggested a voice.

"Mr. Smith! I beg your pardon, sir," said Archie, in apology. "We didn't forget you, but we didn't know you were present on this festive occasion."

"Oh, Mr. Smith, I *am* glad to see you!" And Theo gave him her hand with such a happy look that Mr. Smith replied that he saw no reason to doubt it this time.

"Take Theo to her room, Val," suggested he, "and I will go down to the stables with these boys."

Then, with arms about each other, the two girls ascended the stairs, and Theo was ushered into her room.

"Mine is next yours," Val informed her. "Isn't it lovely to be here close together? Oh, Theo, I feel as if I should jump out of my skin, I am so glad to see you."

"I am perfectly bewildered," said Theo. "It seems like a dream. Do tell me how it all came about."

"Well, let us sit down and have a good talk. Where shall I begin? Oh, yes; you know you wrote about your drive with Mr. Smith; well, we were interested, of course, and I never dreamed—but no, I am getting ahead of myself; it is best to tell you this way. About a week ago, one evening, auntie and I were sitting on the porch, when some one stepped up and announced himself as Mr. Smith, from Newburgh; we of course thought of your Mr. Smith at once, and were very glad to see him, but in a few minutes we discovered that—Theo, guess: who do you think Mr. Smith is?"

"I cannot imagine," Theo returned, with a blank look. "Who?"

"Why, the colonel."

"The colonel! Your colonel?—your guardian?"

"Yes, that is just who he is. Isn't it funny we never thought of it? And we knew his name was Smith; but we never identified him as your Mr. Smith."

"I never once thought of it. I have always been so used to thinking of your guardian as 'the colonel.'"

"That is just it; and we have always written, auntie and I, to his business address in New York. You see, I never saw him,—that is, to remember him. I believe I did see him when I was a baby. You know he was an old friend of my grandfather's, and it was for his sake he consented to be my guardian when papa died. He always corresponded with mamma and then with auntie about me."

"He told Jack he hated girls," said Theo, laughing at the remembrance.

"Did he? Well, maybe he does,—most girls; but he doesn't hate us, I know. You should have heard him talking to auntie about you. He said your account of us, of your home, and everything, was what brought him down to see us. He said you were so different from the girls of the period; you were like his sisters used to be; that so many girls nowadays were mere puppets, were distracted over money and fashion, and you seemed like another kind entirely."

"And he knew all the time that you were his ward when I was talking about you! He never said a word

about it. And that is how he happened to know about auntie. I wondered so."

"Yes, it is just like him; he is so queer. I thought at first he was horrid; but oh, Theo, he isn't; he is just delicious inside."

Theo laughed. "You would think him a cream-chocolate, or something like that," she said.

"Never mind," Val laughed in return. "Well, anyhow, he was interested, and said you made him feel somehow as if he had not done his duty in never coming to see me."

"I never said such a thing."

"I know you didn't. You just made him feel as if he had been selfish. He said you have such a beautiful high-minded way of looking at things."

"Oh, Val!"

"Well, he didn't exactly say that, but I know that is what he meant. Well, anyhow, he at last proposed to take me back with him: he said you needed me. Do you, Theo?"

"I believe I do, Val." And Theo gave her a mighty squeeze.

"Well, we came on to New York, and there we picked up Archie and Jack,—you know the colonel was a friend of Jack's father's. The colonel wanted me to stop a few days in New York, but I was so crazy to get here I couldn't wait, so we just stopped over one night, and then came on; and—oh, Theo, we have the most beautiful plan: I am going to be here a week, and then the colonel is going to take me to Niagara, and we are going to stop here on the way back and get

you,—by that time you will be ready to go,—and we are all going to be in New York together for a few days. Won't it be fun?"

Theo agreed that it would be great fun. "And auntie?" she said.

"Oh, Miss Madeline is stopping with her while I am away. Isn't the colonel just splendid?"

"He is a dear old delight. I wonder if I would best call him colonel or Mr. Smith?"

"I don't believe he cares. You know he was a colonel 'endurin' ob de wah,' as mammy says."

"How is dear old mammy? And Eldorado Ann, how is she? And oh, Val, how is dear Ishmael?"

"Poor Ishmael!" responded Val, sadly.

"Why, Val, what is the matter? He isn't dead?" said Theo, in alarm.

"No; but he has had an accident. I didn't like to tell you, for I thought you might not notice it; but I suppose you will."

"Do tell me: don't keep me in suspense about the dear darling."

"His dear bufy tail got rocked on, an' dey are a ittle bitty piece gone," said Val.

"Oh, gacey my!" responded Theo, for the two girls always talked what they called "kitty talk" over Ishmael, which Archie said was the most idiotic lingo he ever heard. "An' he had suts a bufy long tail."

"Yes, but he is bufy anyhow."

"So he is: he is mitty's luby-dub. But how about mammy and Eldorado Ann?" said Theo, returning to her ordinary way of speaking.

"They are well; only mammy groans every time she thinks of you. She is perfectly miserable over your absence and Archie's, and asks every day what day of the month it is, and how long before September comes in. Eldorado Ann, now that you're not there, doesn't care much about her personal appearance. Once auntie had to send her home; she has been a little better since; she came back the next day, and begged so hard to be allowed to stay."

At this moment dinner was announced, and the girls went down-stairs, where Val caught sight of Mr. Smith standing with the two boys in the hall, and, in the exuberance of her feelings, she flew at him and clasped him around the neck, exclaiming, "You dear darling old colonel, you don't know what a love you are!" to the colonel's great confusion and dismay.

"But it took some of the starch out of him," Archie privately declared afterwards. And he seemed quite mellowed by having the bevy of young folks around him.

The old housekeeper was delighted at the presence of two young ladies, and the gray-haired butler looked on in astonishment at the pranks and merriment of the youngsters.

"It's been many the day since the likes of that has been in this house," he declared to Mrs. Barton. And his wonder and amazement reached their height when, during the evening, sounds of music and dancing issued from the drawing-room, and, passing through the hall, he caught sight of his master "actilly capering around the room with Miss Le Moyne," he avowed. "You could

'a' struck me down with a feather, Mrs. Barton, I was that nigh purrilized." For Val had so teased and coaxed and cajoled the colonel to dance with her, that when she seized him by the hands and twirled him around, he thought it more dignified to submit gracefully than to allow himself to be dragged around "like a calf at the end of a rope," he asserted, for Val's little ways were not to be withstood, and it was impossible to be angry with her.

Then Archie's drolleries and absurd stories so tickled Mr. Smith's fancy that he laughed and chuckled over them, again confounding Parsons, who, accustomed to curt orders and unbending frigidity, could not understand this sudden change in his master's demeanor. And, indeed, he was scarcely less surprised than was Mr. Smith himself, who tried to frown himself back into his former dignity by saying, "A man of my age should know better than to open his doors to a parcel of young cubs and kittens." But having once succumbed there was no hope for him, they all fell upon him with such vigor, protesting against his returning to his shell, audacious Archie calling him "Colonel Tar'pin." So at last he gave up, and really enjoyed his defeat. "I shall have to discharge all my servants," was his final remark: "they will have no respect for me after this."

Sunday passed all too rapidly. Archie and his sister had a long talk, in which Archie confessed to his life not being all "beer and skittles," and Theo pronounced her experiment a "very thorny path, but it is so near over now, and with this delightful break in it I shall

not mind the rest. And oh, Archie, just beyond it is home."

"Old Mr. Allen is a tough customer," Archie had remarked. "He is crust all the way through, baked so hard it would take an axe to break through to his heart. I doubt, indeed, if he has any heart. I fancy it would take a microscope to find it. I believe he almost hates Jack. If it were not for Jack I should have a pretty stupid time; but we can have a few larks together, fortunately."

"Not real larks," Theo corrected, with a vision of New York wickedness, as she pictured it, rising before her.

"Nothing, fair saint, to alarm you: just mild trips to Coney Island, or knockings about town in a perfectly harmless way." Then changing his tone, "Don't bother about me, The; I don't forget myself; and if I wanted to, Jack wouldn't let me. My goodness! you would think the boy my grandfather sometimes, he is so afraid I will run beyond my tether; he knows I won't, too, he says; but we like to be moral props to each other; and I reckon it's well that we do. Dear old Jacobus!" And Archie lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

At Mr. Smith's request, Theo made arrangements for the next week to pass every night at Lyndehurst with Val, Mr. Smith sending for her and seeing that she was at her post each morning at nine o'clock. Jamie alone rebelled at this, and once or twice Theo obtained leave for him to accompany her, an arrangement which pleased not only the little boy, but the entire Park-

hurst family, as Mr. Smith's wealth and position were such that Theo as his guest rose in the eyes of them all, especially of Miss Leonore.

"I should think you would have a very stupid time," she said. "Do you dare to speak above a whisper? I should think you would have holes in your head from Mr. Smith's gimlet eyes."

Theo laughed at the recollection of Mr. Smith's coat-tails flying around as Val wildly waltzed him about the room, and replied that Mr. Smith was not so very crusty after all,—an assertion the correctness of which Miss Leonore would have been glad to have the opportunity of testing, which, however, was not vouchsafed her.

By the end of the week Val had completely won her way to the old man's heart. "It is such a pity you hate girls," she would say, as she kissed the top of his bald head or hung about his neck, laughing down his protests till he pronounced himself entirely bewitched.

But for Theo he always had his gentlest word, and she felt that here was a friend who recognized the best within her, and whose best she, in her turn, had discovered: so between the two there was a confidence,—a reverence for sweet, pure, unspoiled girlhood on the one side, and a trust in brusque sincerity and uncompromising justice on the other.

At the end of the week another visitor appeared at Lyndehurst, a dear little old lady, Mr. Smith's sister, as unlike him as possible, except in an unaffected manner and a direct way of speaking.

"I am so glad to know her," Theo confided to Val.

"It is so nice to meet rich people who are like that; who have so much sense, and who are so simple-hearted. I think Mrs. Westerly is lovely; and she is so bright and intelligent. I feel as if I have libelled her when I think of what I have said about rich people. I am going to tell her."

And so she did, Mrs. Westerly smiling at the girl's earnestness.

"My dear," she said, "it is only because you are young that you thought so. Did you suppose you could get through life without making any mistakes? One's first experience is very apt to emphasize one's opinions. You were no more mistaken than Lloyd. You know his opinion of girls in general."

This quite comforted Theo, who felt that after all she had not been more obtuse than the astute Mr. Smith.

It was arranged that Mrs. Westerly should go to Niagara with Val and the colonel.

"Oh, dear, if you could only go too!" Val had sighed to Theo; but Theo bravely smiled, and said she had not a word of complaint to make, since these latter days had been made so delightful. "And in a week or two we shall all start home," she said: "that is enough to make me stand anything."

"You dear!" Val had replied. "The colonel knew you were homesick. Did you know he did?"

"I suspected it," Theo smilingly admitted. "The dear old fellow, he brought me the best medicine in the world." And, with a parting kiss, Theo returned to her duties, which were to be followed unbrokenly till she should take her final departure.

There came glowing letters from Val, who was enjoying her trip as only Val could enjoy anything. There were tender words from auntie, who, as the time drew near for her children's return, could let her heart out, showing how sorely she had felt this trial. There were triumphant, spasmodic bursts from Archie, whose term of durance was also near its end.

With Val, Archie seemed to receive what Mr. Smith was pleased to call his tolerance, for Archie was so delighted at being loosed from his "prison walls," as he termed them, that he was irresistibly absurd, and yet withal so winningly manly that Mr. Smith took a great fancy to him, and showed so keen an interest in the boy's future that it augured well for him. As the last days became fewer and fewer, Jamie counted them dolefully, Eugene awoke to something like regret, and even Fan ceased her tricks; while Mrs. Parkhurst made Theo the flattering offer of a permanent position.

"You have done so well, Miss Nelson," she said, "that I have felt very much gratified, especially as I have so stoutly maintained the wisdom of employing a young teacher."

But no inducement could win consent from Theo to remain longer, though she was very loath to leave dear little Jamie, and she declined all offers, steadfastly setting her thoughts towards home.

"Please, Miss Theo, tell me one more story," entreated Jamie on the night before her departure. And so Theo, seeing him nestled safely in bed, sat by his side and told a wonderful tale of a baby alligator,

snatches of which reaching Fan's ears, she crept out of her room and snuggled up at the foot of Jamie's bed, while Jamie fell asleep, his little hand clasping an alligator's tooth which Theo had given him as a parting gift and which had suggested the tale. When Jamie's lids closed over his blue eyes, Theo did not stop her story, but, bringing in a beautiful princess, she kept on till Fan's great eyes shone with interest; and under the excitement of the moment, and with the prospect of losing this dispenser of fairy-tales, she threw her arms around Theo's neck and burst into a paroxysm of weeping, to Theo's great astonishment, who then and there in her heart forgave Fan all her shortcomings.

Mr. Parkhurst rather resented Theo's utter disregard of the alluring offer held out to her, and bade her adieu somewhat haughtily. He was a little man who sometimes confounded rudeness with dignity, and fancied indifference to courtesy might be mistaken for a very creditable kind of pride.

Mrs. Parkhurst simply deplored Theo's decision, and Miss Leonore, though inwardly sharing her father's surprise, only said, "You always were an enigma, Miss Nelson," giving Theo an idea, as she told Archie, that she suspected a "canister" motive somewhere.

Mr. Felix had been rather kind, loaning Theo books and at times finding himself somewhat interested in a girl who "did not fling herself at his head," he told his sister.

Miss "Pinky Pokkus" was serenely content at anything that did not disturb her present well-being.

And so Theo packed her trunk with no regrets except for Jamie, who clung around her neck sobbing as she kissed him good-by; and she drove away with scarcely a look back.

How different was the trip down the river with Val and Mr. Smith from that one in which Mr. Smith had before figured! As they settled themselves on deck, Theo's eyes met the colonel's.

"You thought I was an old bear," was what his said; and

"You thought me a silly school-girl," was what Theo's said.

Oh, the gladness of mere being, that September morning! the going towards a whirl of delight; girlish hands stretched forth to grasp the opening bud of pleasure, whose heart was still hidden by its outer leaves. A week in New York! A vision of a very epicurean existence; of walks and drives; of theatre; of concert; of dazzling shops, and all the array of pretty things dear to a girl's heart.

"I could jump up and down, I am so happy," exclaimed Val. And Theo almost echoed her, for beyond the week's pleasure stood auntie, dear, loving auntie, waiting,—oh, how patiently, yet how eagerly!—for the home-coming of her little brood. And so to Theo auntie's face shut out all other visions, and her heart's longing travelled far and fast to auntie's arms.

CHAPTER XVII.

TOMMY.

"Don't you feel delightfully important?" exclaimed Val, as she put the finishing touches to her toilet.

The two girls were in their room at the hotel, preparing for dinner. Archie and Jack were to dine with them, and then they were all to go to the theatre. Val was all in a quiver of excitement, and darted about like a humming-bird, while it would be hard to say which of the girls chattered the most.

"Just think! it is really Broadway." And Theo, standing by the window, looked interestedly out on the busy thoroughfare. "Val, did you ever see so many funny-looking people? They remind me of the ants we used to watch, the way they all go scurrying along. Doesn't it seem as if they were bent upon walking upon each other's heels? Do you suppose they always hurry that way?"

"Oh, I don't know. Yes, I believe they do; but now everybody is going home to dinner."

"I could watch them all day," Theo said. "It is so interesting to see so many different kinds, sorts, and conditions."

"Do come away," entreated Val. "You will never be ready for dinner, Theo. You know we must put

on our best bibs and tuckers." And Val contemplated herself in the glass, secretly wishing she could look a bit less like a little girl, but comforting herself with her new light gloves and her pretty fan, which somehow seemed to suggest a great deal.

"To-morrow, Theo," she went on, "we can go and see the shops. Won't it be fun? And we must find something pretty to take to auntie."

"Yes," returned Theo, leaving the window, "and something for mammy and Eldorado Ann."

They felt like young women of vast experience as they entered the dining-room, and the little party was considered very complete.

"All but auntie," whispered Theo to Archie. And how delightful to feel themselves a part of that company upon "pleasure bent" which sallied forth towards the theatres! There was something in the very sight of the bell-boys hastening about the hotel corridors, in the very click of the ice in the pitchers of water they bore, in the glimpses of damsels and dames ready for their evening's entertainment, that gave a novel charm to it all. And then the rumble of vehicles in the streets, the sudden whir followed by as sudden a dying away of the noise of the elevated trains, which made them take long breaths of satisfaction; and when they pinned on the long-stemmed roses which Jack had brought them, it was with such a delightful feeling of completeness.

Then the first sounds from the orchestra, as the doors of the theatre swung open for their entrance, and the sensation of expectant emotion with which

they examined their programmes. Surely, surely, never was such a delightful end to a summer.

And what absorbed faces were turned towards the stage! Mr. Smith watched them more than he did the actors themselves, these two unsated young creatures, to whom even such an every-day affair as an ordinary play could give such intense pleasure; and he looked reflectively around at the bored, *blasé* faces among the audience,—dissatisfied young women, critical young men, to whom no such joy could come, for the wine-cup of pleasure had been held to their lips from babyhood. Oh, wise, wise auntie! your unspoiled darlings have you to thank for the sweetness of this first sip.

"It was so beautiful!" breathed Val, with a long sigh, when it was all over. "Oh, colonel, you don't know how lovely it was."

"Was it?" he said, smiling.

"Didn't you think so?" queried Theo, with astonished eyes at there being a shadow of a doubt of it.

"I have seldom enjoyed anything more," he returned, looking at the bright faces.

For the next week, every day brought some new enjoyment. There were the shops to see, Tiffany's and Vantine's to explore. There was the trip across Brooklyn Bridge, and, since the weather was still warm, a jaunt to Coney Island. Then there was the Metropolitan Museum and the drive through the Park; there was a view of Wall Street and the Stock Exchange, besides a tour of inspection given to a huge ocean steamer, and last, but not least, a dinner at Del-

monico's, which seemed the acme of excellence and was the crowning-point of satisfaction.

"I feel years and years older," said Val. "I know I have grown inches. Don't you feel like a giant, Theo?"

"I don't know how I feel," returned Theo. "I believe I feel more like an encyclopædia than anything else."

One unexpected little episode occurred which seemed to have been arranged at a most opportune time.

The boys, Archie and Jack, who spent every evening with the girls, came in with quite a tale of interest.

"Who do you suppose is in New York?" began Archie. "Some one from Roseville."

"I cannot imagine," from the girls.

"Nannie," suggested Theo.

"Fly Crawford," from Val, whose thoughts travelled to her tormentor.

Archie shook his head: "Guess again."

"We never could guess. Tell us."

"Ask Jack: he is the discoverer of this new acquisition to New York,—this new A. T. Stewart."

"Tell us, Jack."

"Make it interesting," interpolated Archie; "give it all the romance possible, old man; that will please these damsels."

"Let me get my wits together," began Jack, "so as to begin in the most approved style.

"It was this morning. I had made my cheerful adieux to my friend Archie, who had betaken himself

to his office. Sitting alone with my books, I became weary of them and of my own poor society, so methought I would sally forth into the world to gather information, amusement, and exercise. As I descended the stoop of our palatial residence on Twenty-First Street, I saw scanning the house with some evident motive a forlorn-looking, ragged, dirty little urchin, whom I accosted thusly: 'What is it, youngster? Are you looking for some one?' Imagine my surprise when he replied, 'I want to find Mr. Archie Nelson. Say, you know him, don't you? Where is he?'

"For a moment I was puzzled. What mysterious messenger was this? What dark and lurid secret did he wish to convey to Archie? What was the import of this unexpected demand for my bosom friend? I looked closer; the recollection of a departed Christmas came to me. I recognized in this ragged, miserable little object my old friend—Tommy Reed."

"Tommy?" exclaimed the girls.

"Who but Tommy! I asked the poor little chap," Jack continued, dropping from his artificial style,—"I asked him how in the world he got here, and—I tell you the little rascal has enterprise at least—he said he had run away from home, that he knew Mr. Archie was in New York, and he was tired of Roseville; he wanted to go somewhere else. 'There ain't nothin' to do there,' he said, 'and I ain't goin' to stick there all my life. I stole a ride on a freight-car to Baltimore, an' I heard they wuz a steamboat what went to Philadelphy, an' I got aboard her an' hid, an' I told 'em when we wuz started I'd work my passage, an' I did.

Then when we got to Philadelphy I set out an' walked the rest of the way.' "

"Poor little soul!" put in Theo, compassionately.

"Well, it seems that he had had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours. He had learned Archie's address from Eldorado Ann, and with that one idea in his mind he wandered over the city till he found the place. But when he rang the bell they shut the door in his face, saying Mr. Nelson was not in. His thought was to sit on the steps till Archie should come home, but he was driven off several times, coming back each time with a hope that Archie might be in after all, and that he would be able to catch sight of him at a window."

"Where is he now?" questioned the girls.

"You might know," broke in Archie, "Jack would get him fixed. He stuffed him with such a dinner as he never had before, bought him a new suit of clothes, found a place for him to stop, and has been travelling about all day looking him up a job. That's Jack, you know."

"Oh, let up, Arch," Jack protested: "only a brute could have done less. If you could have seen the poor little rat, you would have done the same."

"But his mother,—poor Mrs. Reed,—what will she think?" asked Theo.

"Oh," Jack returned, "she knows he is safe by this time. I sent a telegram to Miss Janet saying he was here with us."

Theo shot him a grateful look; and Mr. Smith, who had been silent during the recountal of Tommy's travels, was steadily observing Jack's unconscious face,

glowing with feeling and kindliness towards the little wanderer.

"We can take him back with us," presently suggested Archie.

"He won't stay," Jack declared.

"But it would be dreadful to leave him here alone." And as Theo gave utterance to her opinion, Mr. Smith emphasized it by a thoughtful nod.

"That's a fact," Jack returned. "He would probably go to the dogs. I say, Arch, we might hire him and make a valet of him."

At the thought of Tommy as a valet Archie grinned. "Wouldn't do," he contradicted. "We really shall want a few moments for study, Jack, and it would take one of us most of the time to watch Master Tommy."

"Bad boy?" questioned Mr. Smith.

"No, not exactly; that is, the poor little beggar hasn't had half a chance; he is smart enough, and I maintain he has the making of a worthy member of society, though, I must say, he is not a saint." And Archie smiled at the remembrance of some of Tommy's past sins. "I believe he would be all right if he had something to occupy him, but he gets into mischief, it seems to me, from a lack of something better to do."

Mr. Smith sat reflectively leaning back in his chair, and after a little he turned to Jack, saying, "Fetch him here to me. I'll have a look at him."

"When?" asked Jack.

"To-morrow morning; nine o'clock."

And so Master Tommy, with Jack as his backer,

made his appearance. He seemed unaffectedly glad to see Theo and Val, and stood a much improved-looking boy by his recent tidying up.

Mr. Smith glared at him fiercely, but Tommy, though a trifle daunted, looked the old gentleman square in the eye, and was so quick with his answers, seemingly so grateful to Jack, and so ready to go to work, that Mr. Smith dismissed him with a nod of satisfaction, which gave them all to understand that he had some plan under consideration.

What the plan was he divulged to them that evening.

"I'll give your boy a job," he announced to Jack when he came in.

"Oh!" exclaimed Theo and Val, clasping their hands.

Mr. Smith paid no attention, but went on: "My gardener can take him in hand. David is a Scotchman: he'll be strict; but the boy needs a firm hand."

"He won't be unkind?" Val queried.

A furtive smile from Mr. Smith: "No, miss, he will not beat him, if that's what you mean. David is getting old, and needs a young helper. When can he go?" And the old man turned to Jack, as Tommy's self-instituted guardian.

"Any time," Jack returned. "I'll take him up myself, if you say so."

Mr. Smith nodded approval. "I'll give you a note to David," he said. And the subject was closed with Jack's specifying the next afternoon as a proper time for Master Tommy to go, deciding in his own mind

that he would see David himself and try to interest him in Tommy.

And so before twenty-four hours had passed Tommy was established at Lyndehurst, and Mr. Smith received such a chorus of thanks from the party of young people that he told them he should be obliged to get rid of them before they utterly demoralized him.

That he really dreaded losing his young friends was an actual fact, and he yielded readily, though seemingly under protest, to their petition that he would spend the next Christmas with them.

It was indeed a new departure for the old man, whose cynical manner and curt way of speaking led most persons into the belief that he was a veritable Diogenes; but he could not frown down the sunshine of Theo's smiles nor turn a cold shoulder to Val, whose loving little blandishments overmastered him. So day by day he softened towards them all, feeling that he should miss them sorely when they turned their faces southward.

There was a final packing of trunks one morning, a desperate endeavor to squeeze into a compass already entirely occupied the purchases of the week.

"We must not forget our 'Take ones,'" said Val, looking complacently at some Japanese paper shades they had picked up.

"Oh, dear! where shall I put auntie's pitcher? We were silly to get so many breakables; but I was sort of carried away by them. You haven't a corner anywhere, I suppose, Theo?"

"No," returned Theo, looking searchingly at her

trunk. "I am constantly reminded of that rule in physics, that 'where one body is another cannot be without displacing it;' and though I displace and displace in the hope of finding the rule a wrong one, it proves itself every time. No, I must say I haven't another crevice. I tell you, Val: take out that box and roll up some of those things lying under it, then stuff the pitcher full of the things in the box; I believe that will do it."

"You are a genius," declared Val. "There,—yes, it will go beautifully that way."

"Don't let it wobble in the least," Theo directed, "or it will break. Pack it all around very closely. I should roll something around it,—that little shawl, for example, or that scarf. That is it: that will go all right." And at last the trunks were packed.

"You will have to sit on each one, Theo; you are heavier than I." And Val snapped the locks, while Theo seated herself with her feet drawn up on top of the trunks.

A last walk up the avenue, a farewell luncheon at Pursell's, a final look at their rooms, and, joined by Archie and Jack, the girls bade adieu to New York, leaving behind them the old man, who felt as if somehow suddenly the sun had gone down, the winter had come, and night had settled darkly about him.

Theo's color came and went, Archie was most boisteriously gay or pensively silent, as more and more familiar grew the landscape. Oh, the fair, peaceful Virginia hills; the charm of tumble-down cabins and irregular worm-fences; the dear homeliness to be found

in the groups of darky figures lounging about the stations! How sweet the well-remembered speech and the mellow African voices to be heard as the train stopped at some station! How far apart the places seemed to be, after the crowded city! Nearer—nearer—nearer. To Val, more accustomed to change, and counting her home-life in Virginia from only a year back, it meant not so much. Homeless Jack hardly understood it, though he rejoiced to return to his college life. But to those two, brother and sister, returning to the nest after their first long flight, what did it not bring to their remembrance? Nearer—nearer—nearer home and auntie.

"Howdy, Mars' Arch? Howdy, Miss Theo?" right and left, as the gleaming ivories shone from this and that black face smiling a greeting.

Up the long street,—past the little hotel,—by the post-office,—nearer—nearer—oh, so near!

First a glimpse of the gate, then the house outlined among the trees,—the porch,—the open door,—"Auntie!" And, with a cry, Theo was in her arms.

For once Archie was silent, as he folded his aunt closely, as if he would never let her go. Just a moment; then the chattering began; and next it was, "Howdy, mammy?" and "Bless you, honey! Praise de Lord you is all back again," and "How de do, Miss Theo? Hope you're well, Miss Val;" while Eldorado Ann, smiling broadly, beamed from a stiffly-starched, *very* clean apron enveloping a frock which should not be mentioned with the apron.

"Yoh isn't eatin' any supper," whispered mammy,

who must leave the kitchen to wait on her darlings. "Is yoh sick, honey?" For Theo could not take her eyes off her auntie, feeling it feast enough to be at home again, but she roused herself at mammy's entreating whisper, and began to devote her attention to her supper.

"Oh, mammy, you don't know how good these biscuits are; and the chicken,—Archie, doesn't it seem good? A piece of pone? Certainly; I haven't had any since I left; only horrid dry little corn muffins, all sweetened up like cake."

At which mammy shook her head and raised her hands in silent despair of the benighted beings who could submit to such a deprivation.

And auntie,—what wonder that her heart ached with the fulness of joy at the return of her nestlings? What wonder that peace seemed to enfold her, that past griefs were forgotten and troubles' weight seemed lifted? What wonder, for the moment, that Val, whom she truly loved, was lost sight of? that Jack was a mere existence. For her own children, her baby boy and girl, were hers again; and with one on either side she sat through the evening, saying very little, but listening to the outpouring of all the pent-up joys and griefs of the past three months,—just a word from her now and then, an appreciative smile, a little tender squeeze of the hands resting in hers.

"It is so delightful to be understood and to be at home again," Theo sighed, in the completeness of her satisfaction, while she caressed Ishmael, who purred contentedly in her lap. "Auntie, dear auntie, there is no one like you."

Jack and Val, like the good children they were, chattered away in the corner, quite content to give up auntie for a while.

With what a light heart Theo opened the door of her little room, and how precious seemed the retreat! There were the nodding tree-tops whispering together outside; there were the vines trying to climb in the window; all so dear, so familiar. Each little detail had gained new value.

"I am so thankful," whispered the girl, as her head sank on her pillow. "Good-night, good-night," whispered the leaves; "good-night till good-morrow."

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOME AGAIN.

THE Japanese pitcher was safely unpacked. Mammy received her gift of a frock "clar f'om New York." Eldorado Ann nibbled at her box of candy at stated intervals, selecting and putting by, with an appreciative eye for pink, the most seductive pieces, while she favored her palate with chocolate. Mrs. Reed was given a minute account of Tommy's opportunity in life. The girls shook out their gowns and set their rooms straight; while mammy racked her brain for suggestions of such delectable dishes as might please the young people, it being a firm conviction in the old woman's mind that they had been half starved,—a land where batter bread was despised being "no kin' of a place at all. No wonder Miss Theo looked peaked."

The two girls enjoyed being utterly and absolutely silly as much as anything. "It is such a treat," Theo said, "to talk nonsense. I don't care how much of a drivelling idiot I am. No, Ishmael darling," holding him close to her, "mitty doesn't care if his dear bufy tail is short; it is just as lovely as ever. Anyhow, he isn't one of zose g'eat big animals zat walk on zey hin' legs up an' down Broadway. He uses all his footies,

an' don't go swinging down street wis his front legs waving about——"

"What *are* you talking about?" Archie asked, coming around the corner of the porch.

The girls laughed. "I was zus talkin' to ittle Boy," replied Theo.

"Little goose, you mean. You *can* be silly, you two."

"We have such a shining example," Val returned, saucily. "Don't put on airs, Master Archie, because you have been three months in New York. Come and be silly too."

And Archie, glad of the excuse, sat down on the steps between them, lapsing into such meaningless nonsense that their laughter brought out Jack, who had been having a quiet talk with Miss Nelson.

On Monday the boys went back to college and the girls to school, taking up their work with renewed interest.

Nannie Talcott was extremely interested in Theo's summer experience, and laughed at the description of the guests at the Parkhurst mansion, and at Theo's newly-acquired knowledge of worldly doings.

"If Leonore is my cousin," said Nannie, "I must say we are as far apart as the poles. They all think I am utterly hopeless. I am so independent that they say I am a born bohemian, and when I announce my intention of being an artist—of going to New York to study—they look at me in holy horror."

"Are you really going to New York to study?" asked Theo.

"Yes, and to Paris after," replied Nannie, laughing. "Isn't that a delightful dream, Theo?"

"Nothing could be lovelier," replied Theo. "What does your mother say to it?"

"Oh, mamma is my coadjutor. She thinks every girl should be taught to use her best powers in the best way. She says in the best use of one's best powers lies the nearest approach to happiness we can find. She says one ought to find resources in one's own self, and that there would not be so many disappointed women if each had some object in life besides the mere amusement society affords. What should you like best to do, Theo?"

"She would like to have a soup-kitchen for cats," declared Val, coming into the conversation.

"Yes," continued Theo, joining in the laugh and pursuing the subject, "and to found a society to provide homes for dogs that want to be loved, and another to furnish men to patrol the woods to keep boys from killing the birds and robbing their nests."

"In other words, you would like to be a second Bergh."

"Something like it, I shouldn't wonder. But seriously, Nannie, I don't know what I like best. I love home and books better than anything," she added, "and music."

"Then you can take music," decided Nannie; "and if the home and books fail you, you will have an interest in life left you."

"Goodness! what a philosopher you are, Nan!" cried Val. "You quite crush me."

"Oh," continued Nan, giving herself a little shake, "I *hate* to be hampered. That is what is so nice about getting rid of certain demands upon one's time. If you have a profession, not half so much is expected of you from your relatives." Then, laughing, "That isn't a very lofty reason for studying; but I love to study, and I mean to do it as long as I can."

Val shook her head: "I'm afraid I should never like to go around with an apron plastered with paint, and with a streak of blue down my face and my fingers smelling of turpentine. I must say I do enjoy the luxuries of life. Don't you, Theo?"

"Yes," replied Theo, slowly, "I like them; but I can get along without them. And oh, Val, you know I found out there is nothing so precious as home and love."

"For some people," returned Nannie, eagerly; "but I'd like my home to be a studio, and my love to be for mamma and for art."

"Well, my dear Rosa Bonheur, we will let Ishmael sit for you this very afternoon, and you may paint the fence, if you like: it needs it." And Val saucily laughed over her shoulder, as the bell announced the close of recess.

But, though Ishmael did not serve as a model for Nannie, "he had his picture took off," as Eldorado Ann said, many times in the next few weeks, for upon the occasion of Jack's next visit Val, who was the first to have a conversation with him, came running up to Theo's room in a state of excitement and delight.

"What do you think Jack has, Theo?" she cried.

"I cannot imagine. I hope it is a little more polish;" for Theo still would have her little fling at Jack, though in her heart of hearts she could but acknowledge his worthiness.

"You mean, mean girl!" Val indignantly protested. "You don't deserve to have me tell you. If I were Jack I should never give you a photograph. There! I have told. Oh, Theo, he has the loveliest camera you ever saw, and he is going to take photographs of everybody and everything, and Archie is going to help; and they are fixing up a place in the office to develop in, and, oh, it is such fun." And Val rushed down again, leaving Theo to follow at her will.

Of course Theo could not stand being left out of anything so interesting, and she was not far behind Val.

"Oh, do take a photograph right away," Val entreated.

"You'll have to wait, Val," returned Archie. "You'll have time to get your hair arranged in that highly becoming style you sometimes affect.—I say, Theo, that's a scheme; she could see how adorable she looks that way, and we'll promise to do our best."

Val pouted and turned away, with a remark to the effect that some boys never knew when a thing ceased to be funny, while Archie grinned.

The office was a substantial little building a few steps from the house, and was used for all sorts of odds and ends, which were piled up in one corner by the boys, who had a great time getting the ruby light arranged and the shelves put up for the chemicals. Then it was

found there were some chinks through which the light would come, and they had to be stopped. So altogether it took a whole day to get the place properly arranged, and then it was too dark to take a photograph, so it had to be deferred till the next day.

"Who first?" asked Val, as she danced about. "Hurry up, boys; I can't wait."

Jack was arranging his plate-holder, and stood still a moment looking at Theo, who turned away, saying, "I don't care to be an experiment, thank you."

Jack bit his lip, and then said, quietly, "I should like Miss Janet to sit, if she will."

Auntie was as much interested as any of them, and lent herself willingly; while Theo felt ashamed that she had so readily taken it for granted that she would be asked to sit first.

The boys were a long time shut up in the little dark-room, and the girls waited on tiptoe with excitement as to the result. Finally Archie came out laughing. "I am sorry to announce, Miss Nelson," he said, "that you will have to sit again. Mr. Allen unfortunately forgot to remove the slide, and the plate is as unsullied as my conscience."

"Gracious!" exclaimed Val, "what a very dark plate it must be!"

Archie threatened her with a switch he had picked up, and, Jack making his appearance, another trial was made.

"Turn the 'chimera' a little more to the left," suggested Archie, as master of ceremonies. "There. Now, Miss Nelson, keep a pleasant thought in your mind;

direct your eyes towards this point, please. Elevate your chin a little." And Archie, making dabs at his aunt, and standing off with the air of a professional photographer, so disturbed his aunt's equanimity that when the plate was developed it showed so broad a smile that Archie proposed still another sitting, saying that this photograph would always remind them of the Cheshire cat,—a grin and nothing else being on the plate. A third trial gave a better result, as they all incontinently turned upon Archie and locked him up in the office till it should be over. Then, as he promised to behave himself thereafter, he was allowed his liberty, when Val's turn came next.

Val, unfortunately, did not keep quite still, and her face had a "bias" look, as she expressed it; then there was a fogged plate; and finally it was decided to have Theo and Val taken together. This experiment proved more successful, though the plate was a little over-exposed. But each attempt was better than the last, till it was suggested that Jack should take a group in which all the others should appear, and then Archie should take one in which Jack should take his place.

The first was quite successful; even Ishmael did not move.

"Now, Arch," said Jack, as he took his turn, "I'll time you, and when I say, 'Put on the cap,' you'll do it, won't you?"

"All right," responded Archie; but there was a twinkle in his eye that foreboded mischief, Theo well knew.

With unmoved countenances they sat, and Archie having removed the cap, held it in his hand. At the proper moment Jack said, trying not to seem to be speaking, "Put on the cap, Arch." And Archie deftly placed the cap on his head, while Val began to shake with laughter. Then he removed it, looking inquiringly at Jack. "For pity's sake put on the cap," spoke Jack in a throaty voice. Again, with a monkey-like movement, the cap was placed on Archie's head, and Archie looked brightly and expectantly towards them, so that all burst into uncontrollable laughter, and Jack, jumping up, rushed wildly at Archie, chasing him around and around till he caught and pommelled him soundly, while Archie laughed at his wrath.

"And you promised to be good, Archie," said the girls, reproachfully. "Never mind, Jack, we will get Nannie to come over and help us." And Archie was thrust out from further part in the photographing for that week at least.

Many and various were the failures. There were over-exposures and under-exposures; there were prints forgotten, left baking in the sun till they were black; there were seemingly good prints which showed only dim presentments after they were toned and fixed; and there were many blurs and scratches.

Ishmael was in great demand; and though he would sometimes walk off leaving only his tail showing when the plate was developed, or would give himself a double head by turning it just at the critical moment, he was nevertheless quite a favorite subject, and Theo felt condemned by her ingratitude to Jack, when he was so

anxious to please her by giving her successful photographs of her pet.

Sly Jack pleased himself also, and a picture which he took of unconscious Theo leaning against the porch was his joy and delight; for he finished it unknown to Archie and carried it about with him; only that other portrait, painted by Nannie, pleased him any better.

Archie, of course, suggested all sorts of absurd subjects, and to Nannie's delight made some clever photographs of mammy, of Eldorado Ann, of Pearl, all of which pleased Nannie mightily, and she claimed prints of all of them, while the girls' rooms were decorated with such an array of photographs that there seemed danger of there being no room left for anything else. Each week as the boys grew more expert the old ones would be taken down, giving place to new ones of a better finish; and at Christmas, when Mr. Smith made his appearance, so popular a sitter did he become that he finally had to protest against further infliction.

"We've used up all the rest, you know," said Val, naïvely, "and it is so nice to have a new subject: we never had a bald-head before."

Then Mr. Smith professed great umbrage at this reference to his sparse locks. Never had the old gentleman enjoyed a Christmas more, he said, and the holidays flew by all too rapidly for them all.

"And what about Tommy, Mr. Smith?" asked Jack, as they were all gathered in the sitting-room one evening.

Mr. Smith did not answer for a moment, then he smiled. "Tommy is all right," he replied.

"Tell us about him," urged Val.

But Mr. Smith was not a communicative person, and it was hard to get many interesting facts from him: however, by degrees a satisfactory account was obtained. The old gardener, David, had found Tommy rather incorrigible, so given to tricks and to a lawless way of living that the gardener at first protested that he could do nothing with him, especially after Tommy, in revenge for a scolding, had climbed up on the roof of the gardener's house and stopped up the chimney, so that it smoked so persistently that David was in despair. At another time he directed the garden-hose full in the old man's face, pretending to be looking another way as he did it.

Such entire irreverence toward authority had roused David's indignation, and, as he expressed it, he strove against the evil spirit and wrestled as did Jacob. But Tommy remained unruly, and when one Sunday David set him the task of learning so many pages of the Shorter Catechism, locking him in the upper room where he slept, Tommy let himself down in the most approved fashion by tying the bedclothes together, and went off fishing, to David's horror and dismay. At last David could stand it no longer, and carried his tale of woe to Mr. Smith. That gentleman, though secretly amused, had Master Tommy brought up before him, and lectured him in such a way, appealing to his honor as a protégé of Mr. Jack's and Mr. Archie's, that Tommy saw his behavior in a new light and treated old David with more respect.

"The boy is bright enough, and he is not lazy,"

Mr. Smith said, "and I think he will come out all right."

Miss Nelson's affairs profited by Mr. Smith's visit, for he took a real interest in them, helped her to better investments, and reconstructed her old ones, so that, although the next year's income would be considerably smaller than it had been for some years, it would be much better than it had promised before Mr. Smith's advice and assistance were given.

The evening the brusque old man departed Miss Nelson told the girls of how he and Val's grandfather had lain near each other, both wounded, on the battle-field of Gettysburg, one in blue and one in gray; and how, when darkness settled down around them, Colonel Smith's feverish thirst had so increased that his moans reached the ears of Captain Le Moyne, who dragged himself to the side of his foe and shared with him the last drop of water in his canteen, and then had fainted away from the exertion he had made; and Colonel Smith had put out his unwounded arm to clasp the sleeve of the other, so that when they came to bear both away, Colonel Smith raised his head and said, "Find out the name of this man; he has saved my life, I believe." So that the wounded prisoner was watched over, and when the war was ended and he returned to his native State, it was Colonel Smith who aided him, who helped his son, soon made fatherless by reason of that dreadful wound from which Captain Le Moyne never entirely recovered. And it was Colonel Smith who, when the son too died, took charge of the little Val's moderate fortune, and though he had

refused to do more than to attend to her business interests, he gave those a just and careful attention.

"A cup of cold water, dearies," said auntie, laying a hand on each head resting against either side of her lap, as they all sat before the open fire.

"I think it was mighty fine in Colonel Smith to be so grateful. Isn't it queer how ungrateful some people can be? And they think it shows a proper pride, I do believe. If they only knew, it shows anything else," said Val.

"I have seen such people: they really act when you do them a kindness as if it were very good of them to accept it, quite with the air of doing you the favor," replied Theo. "What makes people so crooked, I wonder? Some persons seem morally color-blind."

"Yes, my wise little maiden, that is very true," responded auntie; "but I am afraid we are none of us learned enough to set right all the distortions of minds and morals. We can only try to see when the light is thrown on the dark places, and not shut our eyes to the fact that we all have some very lamentable proclivities. We may not be ungrateful, but are likely to find a broken fence within our grounds through which some other fault has forced its way."

"Oh, auntie, I don't see how you can be so charitable," sighed Val. "If I ever am as perfect as you, I shall expect to see my wings starting out."

Miss Janet laughed. "I hope I have cultivated some breadth of charity," she returned; "but beyond that I am afraid my perfections would not bear close examination. The most of which I can boast is that I

know what I would like to be, and can help my children to that standard. Don't expect poor human nature can ever be perfect."

"Tell us some more about the colonel," said Val, fondling the hand that caressed her head.

"That reminds me of the characters really good people can sometimes seem to wear in the eyes of persons who don't know them. From the tales I used to hear at the Parkhursts' of Mr. Smith's bearishness and boorishness and general horridness, you would fancy him a regular old ogre, who sat like a spider in his web, ready to pounce down on every unoffending passer-by," laughed Theo.

"And that reminds me of something," said Miss Janet. "I think it was my first lesson in a charitable way of thinking of others' faults. I don't know that you remember old Uncle Abram, Theo. No; he died before you were big enough to recollect him. He was mammy's eldest brother, and was inclined to imbibe a little too freely on occasions. So I took it upon myself, in the pride of my youth, to bring him to task, and I descanted largely upon the subject to a very patient and attentive listener, who, when I had finished my harangue, astonished me by saying,—

"'Yoh read yo' Bible, Miss Janet?'

"'Of course I do, Uncle Abram,' I replied.

"'Yoh know what de good book say, Miss Janet? Good book say, "Mus' not jedge,—mus' not jedge," Miss Janet.' And with that the old man got up and hobbled away, leaving me quite discomfited, with not another word to say. But it was a good lesson, for I

don't know how many times the old man's words have come back to me when I have been disposed to criticise my neighbors. 'Mus' not jedge, Miss Janet, mus' not jedge.'" And the girls joined auntie in her laugh at the memory.

"So you see we must not judge the Parkhursts, nor must we judge Mr. Smith. I believe,—though this may savor of gossip, it may explain some of his seeming crabbedness to you,—I believe he was to marry a very beautiful girl, who eloped with another man upon the eve of her marriage to Mr. Smith, and, as she was young, a society belle, and a beauty, it doubtless embittered him against all coming under the same category."

"Take care how you flirt, Miss Val," laughed Theo.

Val made a little face and said she was not in half the danger of doing the serious damage to any one that Theo was to some one. At which Theo tossed her head and walked away, leaving the laugh on Val's side.

And just then the shutting of the gate announced the return of the boys from the station, whither they had gone to see Mr. Smith off, and their entrance put a stop to further conversation on the subject.

CHAPTER XIX.

COUSIN BETTY.

It was cold and frosty weather, a real snowy Christmas, such as had not been known in that vicinity for years: sleighs dashed about in every direction, every one taking advantage of the few days of sleighing.

"Suppose we all go spend the day with Cousin Betty Preston," said Theo, when Jack suggested a long sleigh-ride. "You have never been there, Val. It seems strange, too, that you have not; but you were not well the last time Archie and I went. We used to go over quite often, and we have not been for ages. It is too bad, for Cousin Betty is so fond of us; but then she has been away so much lately.—She is one of the clan," Theo continued, turning to Jack. "Aunt Janet's father and her mother were brother and sister. She isn't so very old, but she seems older than she is, for she has such funny old-maidish ways; but I am sure you will like her, in spite of her oddities. She lives on the old Preston place all by herself, excepting the servants. There is a man who farms the place for her, and she has a very comfortable time. She has such old-fashioned ways: the trimming upon her bonnet is always 'placed,' not put, and she never sees, she 'beholds;' and it is such an old, old place. She just suits it, with

her turkey-tail fan and her mitts. She never goes out, even about the farm, without a veil and sheepskin mittens; you know the kind,—no fingers, just places for your tips to peep out. She always calls us Archibald and Theodora, and is so elegant and dignified. Oh, we must go. Don't you say so, auntie? You will go with us, won't you?"

"You cannot tempt me out of my warm corner by a sleigh-ride," auntie returned. "You will have to excuse me; but I think it would be a very good plan for you young people. Bundle up warm, and don't stay out too late."

"We'll be sure to bring you some seed-cakes," Theo said. "I know Cousin Betty will send you some."

"I'll go around and get White's two-seated sleigh," announced Archie. "Come along, Jack." And by the time the girls were ready Archie and Jack drove up, and they were bundled off with hot bricks and warm messages.

It was a long drive, but they did not mind it. Val's impertinent little nose peeped from a silk hood drawn closely around her face, and Theo's head rose from a big old-fashioned sable tippet, while she had wrapped about her ears what mammy called a "nuby;" and they laughed and joked so much that it was enough to keep them warm, they said.

A bevy of little darkies first caught sight of them, and, seeing them turning in the big gate, disappeared around by the kitchen to give notice of the arrival. So by the time they drove up in front of the old yellow

house Miss Betty was ready to receive them, which she did with great stateliness.

"Cousin Theodora, you certainly are welcome, and Archibald."

"This is Cousin Valentine Le Moyne," explained Theo, "and Archie's friend Mr. Allen," presenting Jack.

"I am extremely pleased to welcome them also," said Miss Betty. "And so this is Cousin Margaret Nelson's daughter?—My dear, I was well acquainted with your mother, but I do not perceive in you any marked resemblance."

"They say she takes after her daddy," remarked Archie, who delighted in shocking his cousin Betty.

"Archibald!" Cousin Betty frowned and shook her head in disapproval; but Archie only laughed, and, seizing her around the waist, gave her a hearty kiss, which, though it ruffled the lady somewhat, did not displease her.

They were ushered into a large room, where an open fire was roaring, and, divested of their wraps, the girls toasted their toes, while Archie marched Jack off "to show him the place," he explained.

"What was it I heard of your going away last summer, Theodora?" asked Miss Betty, as she drew up a chair by the fire. "I was at the White Sulphur, when Cousin Henrietta Nelson told me that you were a governess in a family somewhere up North. I trust I was misinformed. Probably Cousin Henrietta did not get her information directly."

"It certainly was true," confessed Theo. "What was there so dreadful about it, Cousin Betty?"

"A Nelson, my dear,—a female Nelson,—so lowering herself! I cannot imagine Janet giving her consent."

"I don't feel a bit lowered," Theo replied.

"My child, where is your pride?"

"It was my pride that took me," Theo quietly said. "I had too much pride to be dependent when I need not be, and too much pride not to continue my studies with the rest of my class."

"Of course, my dear, very creditable; but Archibald should not have allowed it."

"He did fuss like everything," Theo admitted, "and said he was ashamed to have his sister work for her living, but I finally showed him that it was not pride that troubled him, but weak-mindedness. I think it is weak-minded to object to doing anything honorable,—that it is not degrading to help yourself when necessity comes, half as much as it is to accept help from other people." And Theo lifted her chin and looked as haughty as Miss Betty herself.

Miss Betty looked at her a few moments. "You are your father over, Theodora," she said, and the tears came into her eyes. "Why did you not tell me? You know it would have been my pleasure to share my last penny with you. You do not consider me at all, Theodora."

Theo put out a soft hand and took hold of Miss Betty's. "Do you think I am hurt by my experience, Cousin Betty?" she asked.

"No, my child," Miss Betty confessed; "but it grieves me, and you are so young."

"That is something I am daily trying to overcome," responded Theo, laughing. "Come, Cousin Betty, tell me about your turkeys and your funny little nigs. How is Manchild? And what has become of Tatty? —Oh, Val, you must see Manchild; he is such a little mite, and his mother is so proud of him, for all the rest of her children are girls.—I must go down to Aunt Prissy's house, Cousin Betty; let me take Val there." And Theo conducted Val through the broad hall, through the wainscoted dining-room, and past the kitchen, just beyond which was Aunt Prissy's house.

Aunt Prissy dipped and courtesied, proudly showing off her youngest hopeful, who, attired in yellow flannel and sucking a piece of fat bacon, was sitting in a clothes-basket.

"He so little I reckon he a duwarf," Prissy remarked. "Yoh reckon he grow, Miss Theo?"

And indeed the small black mite was phenomenally small, though his mother stood him on his little bandy legs to make the most of him.

Theo confessed she could not see any marked improvement in the matter of size, and then drew Val's attention to the plaster figures nodding on the mantel. "I used to admire those immensely when I was a small child," Theo told Val. "Do you remember, Aunt Prissy, how I used to come down here Sunday afternoons and read to you?"

"'Deed I does, miss," replied Prissy. "Yoh was mighty little, Miss Theo, when yoh begun readin'."

Theo laughed. "I can just see myself," she said. "I knew the fourteenth chapter of St. John and the

twenty-third Psalm by heart, and I used to take my Bible and read those off as importantly as if I knew how to pronounce every word from Genesis to Revelation."

"Dat was all right, Miss Theo," insisted Prissy. "Yoh done 'em all right, anyhow. Yoh was just as smart readin' off de book as on it," determined that Val should not underrate Theo's acquirements.

The girls laughed, and Prissy showed them with great pride her collection of glass, which loaded a table, and was indeed a very remarkable collection, but one which Prissy admired quite as much as Mrs. Parkhurst did her bric-à-brac.

The girls returned to the house by way of the kitchen, whither Prissy accompanied them, and where the salt-rising bread was baking in the iron oven, and six little darkies of various ages, all girls, were scrambling about.

"That is Tatty,—the biggest one," Theo informed Val. "She is going to be my maid when she is big enough.—Aren't you, Tatty?"

Tatty showed her white teeth, and answered, "Yas'm." She adored Theo, and her highest ambition was to serve as Theo's maid when she grew up.

Then Val was shown the portraits of the great-grandparents, which hung in the dining-room, and the family silver, which had been buried in the graveyard during the war, and the fine old pieces of furniture, which Jack, who had joined them, declared would make their fortunes if sold in New York.

"There are such lovely old-fashioned gowns and

jewelry belonging to Cousin Betty. The gowns are up in the attic," Theo confided to Val. "I wonder if Cousin Betty would mind my showing them to you. There is one gown that fits me to a T."

Cousin Betty was very fond of Theo; the romance of her youth had been her love for Theo's father, who was her first-cousin; but so strong had been Mr. Preston's objection to the match, that in obedience to her father Miss Betty had discarded her young lover, who afterwards met and fell in love with a sweet Maryland girl, whom he married. To Theo more than to Archie Cousin Betty's heart went out, for Theo more closely resembled her father, and was named for him. So Cousin Betty could refuse Theo nothing in reason, and to the girls' request gave her consent, but warned them against taking cold; a warning the girls respected by wrapping themselves up well before rummaging.

Val pleaded so hard to see Theo in the old white satin wedding-gown of her great-great-grandmother's that Theo took it down, and, begging from Cousin Betty the pearls that went with it, she arrayed herself, copying closely her ancestor's style of wearing her hair, and then she stepped down the broad stairway, standing a moment smiling on the unconscious group in the hall below.

It was growing dark, and the white figure coming out of the gloom behind it looked almost ghostly. For a moment Cousin Betty was startled, as the old house bore the reputation of being haunted, and Jack sprang to his feet at Miss Betty's cry of surprise; but the picture he saw he never forgot. With her sunny

brown hair piled high up on her head, with the pearls around her slim white throat, and with the trail of the quaint old gown gathered up in one hand, Theo slowly descended. The lights from the fire in the big fireplace flickered about her feet, shod in the high-heeled old slippers; the beams from the candles in the sconces touched the gold lights in her hair; the sweet, innocent eyes wore a little conscious look, as the gaze of the whole party was upon her.

"She is lovely!" exclaimed Val, in a whisper; and for a moment Theo seemed a being stepping out of Long Ago,—a representative of a by-gone time,—a dream of the past become a reality of the present.

"How solemn you all look!" she said,—"even Archie! Pray, good people, don't take me for a ghost: I am only Theo." And she paused, laying her slender hand on the carved post of the balustrade.

"You do look ghostly, The," said Archie. "Come down and let us find out if you are real flesh and blood." And Theo came into their midst, when Archie pinched her cheeks and declared himself satisfied. And Cousin Betty, moved out of herself, threw her arms about the girlish figure, and kissed the smooth forehead, then bade her change her dress, lest she should take cold.

After the enjoyment of a supper such as only a negro "aunty" can cook, they all huddled into the sleigh again, with more hot bricks, with a bag of seed-cakes, and with abundant admonitions and advice from Cousin Betty.

"Come as soon as you can again," she called, "and

do not forget to tell Janet I want her recipe for chocolate-cake. Theodora, be sure you take something hot when you get home,—a little toddy or something. Archibald, do not forget to close the gate after you: I object to Johnson's hogs being in here. Bring Valentine again, Theodora, and Mr. Allen, too. You all are very remiss in coming."

And at last they were off, spinning along in the moonlight over the snowy road.

"Isn't it a dear old place?" said Val. "I should like to live there, I believe; at least in summer."

"Yes, it is lovely in summer," returned Theo. "I used to go there when I was a little girl and stop weeks with Cousin Betty. Poor Cousin Betty! I am afraid I have neglected her lately."

"You ought to have a better eye to your future," Archie remarked, turning around.

"Oh, hush, Archie!" exclaimed Theo. "You ought to be ashamed."

"What does he mean?" inquired Val.

"Oh, that is one of his ways of teasing. He always insists that I think Cousin Betty is going to leave her property to me, and that I am very nice to her in consequence.—You know it isn't so, Archie."

Archie only laughed, and told Val to watch Theo's assiduous attentions the next time they went to Preston, and see if he were not right in his suspicions. But Val never had the opportunity, for it is so often the unexpected that happens; and a week later, when the boys had returned to college and when there seemed only a quiet, even life stretching before them for some

months to come, suddenly there came a messenger from Preston: "Could Miss Theodora come to Miss Betty? She was ill, and longed for Miss Theodora constantly."

"You must go, my child," decided Miss Nelson, "and I must manage to go with you."

"Oh, no, auntie," protested Theo; "you know you have such a cold, and to-day you have been really ill with a headache; I cannot have you go. It won't do to have too many patients on my hands," she added, half playfully. "I should not leave you if Val were not here.—But you will be nurse to auntie, won't you, Val?" turning to that person.

"I'll do my best," promised Val; "but I am not the born nurse you are, Theo. I don't wonder Cousin Betty wants you."

"There, auntie, I know your head is aching: don't sit up." And Theo patted the pillows and tucked up her aunt snugly before she left her.

It was a long, cold drive, very different from that last. Mr. Johnson had come over in a buggy, which rattled along over the rough, uneven ground, worn into deep ruts by the recent thaw, though now it had frozen again. The sky was gray and hard, and Theo shivered in the raw air, well wrapped up though she was.

The drive seemed twice as long as that last, when the merry party had sped along so swiftly to the jingle of sleigh-bells. Theo looked around dolefully as she stepped into the hall, where no cheerful fire greeted her. All was cold and silent.

"I hope you'll find her alive," had been Mr. John-

son's gloomy remark as he helped Theo from the buggy; and the girl felt a shudder of dread pass through her as she mounted the stair and turned towards Miss Betty's room.

She opened the door. Tatty sat curled up in a big chair before the fire, nodding sleepily. In the failing light the room seemed dark and cheerless, though the opening of the door caused a fitful little flame to start up from the open fire, which in a few minutes developed into something like a cheerful blaze. Cousin Betty lay seemingly asleep, but the new movement in the room made her open her eyes, and a smile came over her face as she held out a weak hand, then motioned Theo to a place beside her.

"I am so sorry to find you ill, Cousin Betty," and Theo bent over to put her lips to the pale forehead; "but I am going to stay right here by you," she added. "Auntie would have come too, but she was not well herself, and I wouldn't let her."

Cousin Betty made a movement of assent. "I wanted you," she said, in a whisper, letting her eyes rest on Theo's face, rosy from the frosty air.

"Now you must get well," said Theo, cheerfully. And she roused the drowsy Tatty, stirred the smouldering fire, and began at once to make the room appear more as it should.

"Are you the only nurse, Tatty?" she asked, as she knelt before the fire with tongs in her hand.

"Yas'm. Doctah he done been here dis mawnin', an' say he gwine come back ter-night. An' he say how Miss Betty 'bleedged to have a nuss; but Miss Betty

she 'low she won't have nobody but you. An' mammy she sent me up hyar to sit long o' Miss Betty twell you come."

"Very well; I am going to stay now, and you may go and have a little run; but you must come back after a little while: I shall want you to wait on me."

Tatty was pleased to be allowed her liberty, though she felt quite proud of her exalted position as nurse, and was furthermore glad that she could wait on Miss Theo; while Theo herself felt a little less dreary at the prospect of Tatty's companionship. The doctor made his appearance just after dark, and shook his head when he found Theo alone. "I had hoped your aunt could come," he said.

Theo explained, adding that she hoped her aunt would be able to come in a day or two. "But I am really quite a nurse, you know." And the doctor, saying there was no help for it, gave her the instructions necessary.

"She is threatened with pneumonia," he said, "and you will have to be very careful: this weather is not fortunate, and there are a good many cases. You are not afraid to sit up all night alone? I would gladly stay, but I have to be on the go all night to reach all my cases."

Theo gave him the assurance that he might depend upon her, and he went away, leaving the girl with rather a depressed feeling in the great house, with no guidance beyond the doctor's instructions and her own judgment. She longed for auntie, and took her place by Cousin Betty's bedside with a strong inclination to

put her head down and cry; but she resisted the desire, and, rising, set herself about the task of arranging everything for the night.

Prissy came up with a pot of coffee and a plate of biscuits, also some ham, to provide for a midnight luncheon. Uncle Cephas brought up a huge armful of wood. Mr. Johnson came over and insisted upon sleeping in the house, in case his assistance were needed, and Prissy, leaving Manchild and the others with their father, also begged to be allowed to help the lonely little nurse; while Tatty absolutely refused to leave, curling herself up so comfortably on the rug before the fire that Theo consented to allow her to remain. After all, it seemed quite cheerful to have them all at hand, though the night was long and lonesome enough for the young watcher.

Towards morning Miss Betty called, "Theo! Theodore! the yellow roses, dear; they are so sweet,—we always loved them."

Theo started up and bent over the speaker, who rambled on vaguely, going back to the long-ago days of her early youth.

"You will come to-night, Cousin Theo? Don't leave, don't leave me!" she entreated over and over again. And the girl with tender hand smoothed the hot head till the voice was still again.

But at intervals the wandering words continued, and it was a relief when day broke and the gray dawn came creeping in the window.

The day wore wearily away; the doctor came in, looking very grave as he drove away, and Theo mourn-

fully sat in the dusk dreading the long night. Despite her youth, she was worn out and longed for rest; her eyes were heavy and her face pale; the house seemed so big, the halls echoing the tread of Cephas tending the fires, and of Manchild's merry chuckle as his mother carried him out to the kitchen. Theo sat and dreamed in the dim twilight, thinking over all the tales Cousin Betty used to tell her: of how her great-grandmother had come to the house such a young bride, only sixteen,—Theo's own age; of how her great-grandfather had fallen in love with her as he first saw her romping with a little playmate, and how he had declared then and there that no other should be his wife; and, sure enough, four years later the little bride had worn the wedding-gown in which Theo, all these years after, had arrayed herself. Did the little bride spend many doleful hours in the big house? Theo wondered. And then she thought of the lonely evenings Cousin Betty must have passed at that very window. She remembered so well how mysterious it had always seemed to her, as a child, to see the hollow worn in the window-sill by her grandmother's arm as she sat there indefatigably knitting. She pictured the stout, heavy woman of whom so many tales had been told her of what a wonderful housekeeper she was, and despite her weight what an amount she accomplished. Then Theo thought of the old garden; yes, she remembered just where the yellow roses grew; how Cousin Betty always loved them, the delicate yellow blossoms with their shiny, dark leaves; and Theo gave a long sigh, looking out at the red streaks across the clouded sky.

But just then she heard carriage-wheels, and next saw a vehicle stop at the door; then some one mounted the stair, and in another moment auntie softly entered, and Theo gave her a warm though silent greeting.

"You dear child," auntie said, softly, "I could not think of you here alone another night, and I felt so much better I thought the drive would not hurt me. And now you can go to bed and take some rest. Mr. Johnson told me that you had no one with you but the servants."

Theo begged to be allowed to share the vigil; but, as it happened, an additional helper came in the person of another cousin, who, having just heard of Cousin Betty's illness, hastened over to render what service she could.

So with this reinforcement Theo was not needed, and could take her rest.

The morning dawned clear and bright, and Theo sprang up with a feeling that it was not so doleful a world after all. But just as she opened the door of her room, Miss Janet met her and put her arms closely around the girl.

"How is Cousin Betty?" asked Theo.

"She is well, very well," answered Miss Janet, though her lips trembled and her eyes were full of tears.

Theo looked and understood, then she put her head down on her aunt's shoulder, and the two stood there in the glory of the morning sunlight, believing that a fairer, brighter day had dawned for Cousin Betty, though they grieved for one who had loved them so well.

Archie and Jack came over to Preston that night, and the cousins from near and far gathered in the old house to do honor to one of the Preston blood.

Poor little Tatty, filled with awe, followed Theo wherever she went. There was always something about Theo which won the hearts of all dependent and young creatures,—a gentle dignity of manner, a close sympathy with all forms of sorrow and suffering, and a tender consideration for the smallest needs,—and she went from one to another with little unobtrusive attentions which won her the affection of all.

Val, with Nannie, was left at home to keep house during the stay of the others at Preston; and, though Nannie was very satisfactory company, it was rather lonely for Val, who felt as if she were left outside, and longed to have Theo back again.

"Theo has all the experiences," she complained to Nannie.

But Nannie laughed at her and told her not to despair; that her time would come; that Theo's life had been quite uneventful until within the past year, and that Val need not be envious, as they were not such agreeable experiences.

"But it makes her so grown-up and important," Val went on, "and I hate to be insignificant."

"You are such a child," Nannie teasingly said, "nothing will ever make you grown-up." And Val subsided, passing the rest of the time in impatient expectation.

CHAPTER XX.

"AUF WIEDERSEHEN."

"OH, Theo, you dear precious! it is so good to have you home again!" cried Val. "It seems as if you had been away years and years. Nan was as lovely as could be, but Nan isn't you." And Val bestowed fervent hugs upon Theo, who, pale and quiet, stood removing her wraps.

"Now tell me all about it," Val went on,—"about everything. Oh, dear, if you knew how I have pined to hear all the news. There you were going through a real book of romance, and I had to sit at home and do nothing but study horrid algebra and old physics."

Theo smiled, and sat down before the fire, putting her head back against the chair. "I hardly know where to begin. Tell me what you want to know. I don't know just how much has reached you."

"I want first of all to know whose is Preston."

Archie, standing behind Theo's chair, answered, "Theo is the heiress. Be careful, Val: she is a very important person just now." And then Theo, without a word, burst into tears.

"There, dear," said Miss Janet, coming forward. "Come up-stairs with me.—The child is quite worn out," she said aside to Val. "She has been through

so much and is so overwrought: let her have a little rest." So Theo went up to Miss Janet's room and was made comfortable upon the lounge, where she rested the remainder of the day.

So strange, so strange it was that she should be the owner of Preston; she could not realize it, and almost shrank from the thought. It was not a great nor a magnificent inheritance, only an old Virginia homestead set in a few acres of not specially good land, but it seemed to Theo to represent a kingly estate. And it was all hers. What should she do with it in after-years when she should come of age? Now, to be sure, it could only be held in trust for her; and, fortunately, when it was decided by the other relations that it would never do for a stranger to enter and live there, a cousin, recently married, offered to rent it, and so all concerned were relieved from further anxiety on that score. That all had been satisfied at Theo's being the main legatee was a source of satisfaction to her, and she had received such kindly interest and pleasant words that she felt no one grudged her the old place.

She lay there dreamily thinking it all over. What should she do with it? Live there herself when Archie should marry and perhaps live in Roseville? or should Archie live at Preston and she and auntie—for Val would marry, of course—pass the evening of life in the same dear home that now sheltered them? She did not know, and she did not like to contemplate the matter too seriously.

"Fortunately," she said to herself, "there is time enough." So she closed her eyes, slipping away into

quiet dreams, and a sleep from which she awakened as the sun went down, feeling ready to take her place among the others at the supper-table.

And so, after all, Miss Betty did help Theo through her school-days, and the question of ways and means was no longer such a serious one.

Theo took up her music again with much earnestness, Archie pegged away at his studies, Val was fitfully studious or otherwise as the mood happened, but she was developing a finer appreciation of the better things of life, while Theo became more womanly through her experiences of the year, and at seventeen was a charming, lovable character.

The days sped by, winter drifting into spring, spring into summer, and June found them looking forward to a summer of unbroken companionship. There were the usual closing exercises at both the school and the university, and Theo, upon the occasion of her school-commencement, wore her first silk frock. Val had begged to be allowed to wear the same, and so the two girls had a mild excitement over the sending to the city for samples, and though they were the simplest sort of gowns,—white China silks, girlishly made,—the two girls felt very grand in them; and as they did duty afterwards at the university hop, they felt they had been quite economical.

Val had begged Theo to wear the white satin gown, —now, with the pearls, a part of her legacy,—but Theo had declined to appear "in masquerade," she said, and compromised by wearing the pearl necklace.

One of the pleasant surprises at this time was a visit

from Jamie, who had begged that he might come to Roseville with his mother and aunt, and who caused Theo nearly to break down in her part of the commencement programme, by calling out in his little infantile voice, "Oh, there is my Miss Theo! let me go to her." He was not satisfied till he had taken her basket of flowers to the platform, and, as he then absolutely refused to return to his mother, he was allowed to sit upon the platform by Theo's side, to his great content and the amusement of the audience.

Mrs. Parkhurst readily consented to Theo's request that Jamie might be her own special guest for a few days, and the little fellow was perfectly happy, making the acquaintance of all the places of which Theo had told him. He especially admired Ishmael, feeling that in some way he must be more wonderful than any cat in the world, and he expected Ishmael to be more responsive than it is in the nature of cats to be, though it must be said that the dignified animal showed a great partiality for Jamie, and would sit solemnly staring at the little fellow while he lay on the grass in front of him and gave him information on all possible subjects hardly of interest to a feline mind.

It had been Mrs. Parkhurst's intention to renew her offer to Theo, but hearing of her late inheritance she forbore, and treated Theo with a deference which secretly amused that person, as she knew the reason of it.

"She was always very kind to me," Theo assured Val, "but this extreme consideration of my opinions is rather new and very funny."

The engagement of Miss Leonore to the egg-faced

young man, Mr. Tucker, was announced, and Theo, considering she would better commiserate than congratulate, was a little at a loss just what to say, but she solved the problem by sending a message wishing Miss Leonore much happiness. She did it gravely enough, though inwardly convulsed at Val, who, on the other side of the room, was drawing down her face in imitation of Mr. Tucker's and trying to curl her nostrils after Theo's description of Miss Leonore.

"We shall have to marry off Felix next," said Mrs. Parkhurst, with a sweet look at Theo; and when she went on to say how much Felix admired Theo, Val was unable to repress a giggle and incontinently fled, leaving Theo to adjust her countenance and gather her wits in order to make a suitable reply.

As she recounted the conversation to Nannie afterwards, she delivered herself of the opinion that if Mrs. Parkhurst had suggested Jamie she should then and there have entered into a compact to wait for him.

Nannie laughed, as she said Theo must hold her responsible for her aunt's tactics. "I have no doubt she thinks you a magnificent heiress, as I expatiated very largely on the Preston estate."

"She should see it," Theo rejoined. "How she would turn up her nose at the broken-down fences and the dear old dingy house! It wasn't like you, Nan, to mislead her."

"I didn't mean to," Nan confessed. "I was describing it from my point of view, for I think it so delightfully picturesque; and I cannot help it if she chose to imagine it from her standard of elegance."

Auntie took the girls, including Nannie, up to see the boys made juniors, and such a time they had as only girls can have in June, with perfect weather, happy hearts, and no sign of a cloud upon the horizon.

Only to Jack did the summer present anything but a series of long delicious days.

They all came back to Roseville together the day after the hop, with the strains of "Auf Wiedersehen" ringing in their ears. Nannie was the first to leave, with her mother and aunt, bearing away little Jamie, who shed tears on Ishmael's furry coat, and looked out of the car-window with a grieved lip and swimming eyes till a bend in the road hid his beloved Miss Theo from sight.

Miss Nelson viewed her little brood with happy content that she could mother them safely for three months, but Jack stood at one end of the porch looking at them as they hovered around auntie, full of schemes and plans for a summer's pleasure. What held the world for him? he wondered, as his thoughts flew forward to the time when college days should be over, and when from these friends he must turn his face to take up his own life-work. He stood there thoughtfully silent, till Miss Janet called him, and Archie made room for him in the hammock.

"You won't have to spend your summer with old 'Pine Knot,'" said he; "not this year, Arch."

"Oho! that's what you're thinking about. No; but that was a mighty good turn of yours, Jack." And Archie threw his arm over his friend's shoulder. "Are you really going to take my place there?"

"I think so. I ought to: my father wished me to become acquainted with the business."

"I don't envy you," Archie acknowledged.

Jack smiled. "I suppose you don't," he returned. "I don't envy myself, but I think it is best. Two years more, Arch, and then we are free." And he stretched himself out with a sigh of expectant relief.

"I am free enough as it is," Archie replied. "I think I would rather tackle the work at the university than the problems which will come later. I'm in no hurry to drop student life, thank you; but you don't have to consider life quite so seriously yourself. I shall have to go at it with a vengeance."

"Humph!" was Jack's response; "I'm not so sure what I shall have to do. My uncle is as likely as not to get his hands on everything. I know he groans at every red cent he has to pay on my account, and if there is a way to get hold of it, he'll not stand at the method."

"That's a pretty hard thing to say, Jack," interposed Miss Janet.

"I'm afraid it's the truth," was Archie's rejoinder. "You're so unsuspicious, auntie, you don't know."

Auntie laughed: "No, most wise and venerable sir, presumably I do not: it takes graybeards like yourself to teach me worldly wisdom. Anyhow, we will not cross Jack's bridges till we come to them."

"I wish you could spend the summer here," Archie said, turning to Jack, "and let the old office go."

Jack wished so too, but he only shook his head.

"Get your banjo, Jack," suggested Val, "and let us

have the 'Little Peach of Emerald Hue' once more." And to the tink-tank of Jack's banjo they all sang. Then in memory of that last waltz Jack softly played "Auf Wiedersehen."

Mammy sat on the step of her little cabin, dreaming of the time when to the same sound she and Abram and Tony had hearkened, when the place rang with the jolly life of Pete and Book and Jake, and she rested her turbaned head against the jamb of the door and listened.

Eldorado Ann crept softly from her bed to the little window, and thought how nice it was to have them all at home again, and wondered if Mr. Jack would see Tommy soon and give him the neck-tie she had sent him.

Ishmael, curled up in a round ball by Theo's side, raised his head once in a while and stretched himself out in comfortable ease.

Miss Nelson, with Theo on one side and Val on the other, brooded over her nestlings with a thankful heart.

Presently the voices stopped. Through the branches of rose and honeysuckle the star-beams twinkled; there came up sweet odors from the garden, the serenity of a June night enclosed them. And then Jack sang again, alone this time, the song of Grieg's he loved so well, "Ich liebe dich—in Zeit und Ewigkeit."—To all eternity. And such a little distance on the road-way of life these four young people had trod,—so full of dreams of a future, so happy in to-day's present. Let them dream on.

But if one's prophetic eye sees beyond the dreams

the fulfilment,—sees homeless Jack, after much buffeting about, settled in a peaceful home, made a happy one by the gracious presence of one of our girls,—sees Archie a successful lawyer, with a distinct hope of one day being called "Judge,"—sees the other of our two girls, not too far away in a gay city, in a home of her own, to which auntie is a frequent visitor,—auntie, whose hair must be whitened by the frosts of time, but whose heart must be ever young,—one may not chide himself for lack of discernment.

THE END.

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